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Politics of information & knowledge in Africa The struggle for an information inclusive society in a globalised world

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Contents

Biographical Note.....	1
Abstract	2
Information in Africa	2
“Silence in the library”	2
Opportunities for information liberation	5
Globalisation	6
Information society and knowledge economy in Africa	7
The rise of China	8
There is an alternative	9
Social role of librarians.....	11
Progressive African Library and Information Activists’ Group (PALIAct).....	11
PALIAct principles	12
A new beginning?.....	14
An African activist information programme.....	14
Leadership development	14
Collection building	15
The “liberating the mind” /“kuvunja minyororo” collections.....	16
Bibliography.....	18

Biographical Note

Shiraz worked at the University of Nairobi from 1968 to 1984. The Kenya Special Branch took a “special interest” in him on publication of his articles on Pio Gama Pinto in the *Standard*. He then sought refuge in Britain where he worked at Hackney and Merton public libraries. He took up his current post of Senior Lecturer in Information Management at the London Metropolitan University in 2005.

Shiraz, a Fellow of CILIP, initiated the “Quality Leaders Project” in 1999. He is one of the authors of “*Open to all?*” (2000) and has written extensively on politics of information. His

book, *Never be silent: publishing and imperialism in Kenya, 1884-1963* will be published in 2006.

Abstract

The article looks at contradictions facing libraries in Africa where the information and developmental needs of workers and peasants remain largely unmet, while libraries tend to meet the needs of a minority.

It maintains that the model of public libraries remains the same as the one introduced by the colonial powers and the opportunity at independence for bringing about a change to a people-orientated service was lost. The profession remains aloof from the political and social struggles of communities, thus alienating itself from the very people it seeks to serve. The article sees opportunities now for change in some positive aspects of globalisation and in developments in information and communications technology. The rise of China can create new possibilities for change.

It calls for information professionals to be activists in information as well as in social and political struggles of people. They need to work with communities in partnership with other service providers. It makes the point that the profession is not neutral if it supports the status quo by remaining silent on social and political issues.

The article calls for action to put ideas and new vision into practice and gives some details about the Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group (PALIAct) proposal which aims to create an alternative vision, strategy and practice of a people-orientated service in active partnership with communities and service providers.

The article calls upon countries which benefited from African slave trade to support initiatives such as PALIAct as a small way of acknowledging their debt to Africa. It ends by providing elements for an "African activist information programme", including suggestions for leadership development, collection building and "liberating the mind" collections.

Information in Africa

"Silence in the library"

Perhaps the best way to understand the contradictions facing libraries in Africa today is through a story. It is only when social contradictions are accepted and understood that attempts can be made to resolve them. And resolve them we must, if libraries and information are to play their part in creating a new Africa where there is justice, democracy and development for all. The story is "silence in the library":

Nyanjiru wakes up at 4 am; a water debe on her head, she walks for an hour and a half to the nearest stream. Then she climbs back from the river to her home, picking dry wood on the way for fire; she arrives home three hours later to start the day's other work: crying children to be calmed with bits of left over food, chicken to be fed and watered; then to start digging her half acre shamba in the hot, burning sun. This is the daily routine for a peasant.

And then there is Kamau. Kamau pats his dogs fondly as they surround his new Volvo. This is his daily ritual. He realises that the gates are not open yet and hoots loudly. Where is Mutua? Does he not know that today is the library board meeting and he has to report early? They are to discuss library regulations. He has prepared a long list of "don'ts". As Mutua opens the gates, Kamau speeds out, the silent sound of the Volvo soothing his mind. He starts thinking about library rules. Yes, users must be controlled. Only last week he found a fellow eating mandazi in the library. How can that be allowed? Kamau had him thrown out. The first rule is going to be about eating in the library. And then of course "Silence: silence in the library"

Kamau feels happy as he enters the library parking. "Silence Please, Silence in the Library"; "No eating in the library" ... In such an atmosphere of threats works the modern librarian. Inside the stone walls of the library, in total peace and calm among the well preserved volumes, he is oblivious to the ruin and chaos of hunger, starvation and mass exploitation outside.

The contrasting lives of Nyanjiru and Kamau can be found anywhere in Africa. Their activities are taking place within miles of each other and on the same day. Yet the two are so removed from each other that they may easily be on different planets or in different historical ages.

The library is a concrete structure inaccessible to Nyanjiru, and Nyanjiru as a library user is unacceptable to the librarians. For Nyanjiru there is no time to waste, no compromises to be made. All her labour and thoughts are to satisfy her family's basic needs: food, clothing and shelter. Anything that helps her in this work, she accepts with open arms and mind. Anything that prevents her from acquiring what she needs, she will fight. Her information needs are clear - she wants information which will help her to support and protect her family.

On the other hand is the library service - set up during colonial days, with a colonial vision, through 'assistance' from a colonial, neo-colonial 'mother' country. A mother whose very touch brings death. "Silence please; please, silence in the library".

Silence, in spite of Nyanjiru's dying children; silence, in spite of Nyanjiru's twenty hour working day; silence, even though Nyanjiru's hard labour fails to fill her family's stomachs.

Nyanjiru knows no library. No library wants to know Nyanjiru.

The story of Nyanjiru and Kamau highlights the key need in Africa today: development - development of people, resources, industries, agriculture, art, culture... But "development" does not take place in a vacuum. In order to develop, people and societies need relevant information and knowledge in a number of fields such as science, history, geography, history, technology. Yet, under capitalism, information and knowledge and the very process of learning and education have become commodities to be bought and sold on the "open" market. Those without resources to purchase information end up having no access to it. The irony is that even those who produce information often have no access to

that information which is taken from them, copyrighted, patented, repackaged, and sold at prices which the original producers cannot afford.

Thus peoples, countries and societies have been forced into “un-development” and inequality by the economic policies and practices of international finance and transnational corporations using the mechanisms of international financial and political control, such as the IMF, WTO and the UN.

But are these issues that should concern the library profession? Some say it is not our “business” to get involved in “politics” as we are professional people, not politicians. But if we accept that Africa needs a second war of liberation - economic liberation this time - then we need to accept that no liberation can be successful without appropriate information vision, strategy and tactics as well as trained information activists. This is the lesson from the major revolutions in the world. This is also the lesson from Africa’s long history of wars against colonialism and imperialism. And this is where we find a relevant social role for African librarians and information professionals and activists today.

The first requirement for liberation from an inequality imposed on Africa is access to information about the real reasons for poverty. Yet the information and communication systems created by the departing colonial powers were not expected or equipped to put this information before people. They were merely tools for a small, rich elite to impose its world outlook and culture on the poor and exploited majority of people. Post-independence systems and policies have made no fundamental change in this colonial-inspired information framework. We urgently need to seek a role for information profession that is relevant to the needs of Africa in the 21st century.

An important task for Africa is to document fully the achievements, successes and failures of the anti-colonial struggles in Africa. Information about these can arm us for current and future struggles. This has not been fully documented. But if the history of African struggle for political and economic liberation is poorly documented, the struggle for African information liberation is even less well documented and understood. It is not a matter of general knowledge, for example, that during the Mau Mau war of liberation in Kenya, the combatants controlled over 50 newspapers and many printing presses; they set up libraries in liberated territories in forests in cities, ran an efficient information collection system, and created their own distribution network, using “traditional” and modern methods available to them. This complex communications system was created and managed by activist librarians and information workers who were active not only in the information field, but in the larger political and social fields as well. Their experience, if fully documented, can help us find a relevant role for the information professional in Africa today.

And yet today, we tend to follow blindly the “Western” model of public library services which actively seeks to remove politics from information theories and practices. This model has not been successful in the “West” itself to provide information to all, particularly to those politely referred to as “socially excluded”. Yet we in Africa have not fully challenged this situation. It is only by subjecting our current policies and practices to a vigorous challenge that new and relevant theories, policies and practices can emerge.

Opportunities for information liberation

Just as in the political field, so in the information field, there are major developments when social contradictions are at their sharpest. It is at such key points in history that opportunities arise for making revolutionary changes in the way information and politics are organised. Colonial Africa has had a number of opportunities to change its societies for the better and serve the needs of the majority of people. One such opportunity was in late nineteen fifties and early sixties which saw achievement of political independence in many countries. It was a time when foundations of the old colonial world were being destroyed and those of new free societies were being laid. Many activists had the vision of a society where all would have free access to information and knowledge created by the work of all. It was a time of immense change and high hopes for a just, equitable future after decades of colonial oppression and exploitation. This was the time when people did influence events in a major way, underscoring what was said at the World Summit for Information Society (2003): it is “people who primarily form and shape societies, and information and communication societies are no exception”.

But the opportunity at independence to challenge the very basis of social organisations such as libraries was lost. Library services continued to function on the same basis as under colonialism, targeting their services to the elite, although now this included some more people and became “multiracial”. Class divisions, which formed the real divisions in the society, were deliberately played down, and racial, “tribal” and other “divisions” were brought into prominence. An information service operating in the real interest of people would have ensured that this “information blind-spot” was removed and the question of who the library actually serves would have been resolved in favour of the majority of working people. Thus an information service using resources from all but serving a few was developed. This situation has more or less continued until today.

But today, there is another possibility for change. Changes at a global level in the last 25 years now present Africa with another opportunity to make a fundamental shift in the way societies are organised - and in the way information services are organised. If managed correctly, we can make the transition to a people-orientated library service that did not

take place at independence. Let us look at two major changes: globalisation and the rise of China.

Globalisation

An intensified corporate globalisation is the current phase of capitalism and imperialism. This has been made possible by rapid changes in information technologies. The collapse of USSR has left only one imperialist world power (USA) with global imperialist ambitions and resources to impose its will on the world. This has major political as well as economic implications for countries around the world, as evidenced by the invasion of Iraq by USA in pursuit of oil and strategic advantage for profit-driven transnationals.

By its very definition, capitalism divides people along class lines. Working class people as a whole are historically excluded from enjoying wealth created by their labour. Hence capitalism creates a class that is automatically excluded from wealth, power, education and information. There has been a qualitative change in the process of social exclusion in the last quarter of this century on a global level. Castells (1998, p. 1) explains these changes as a "technological revolution, centred around information (which) has transformed the way we think, we produce, we consume, we trade, we manage, we communicate, we live, we die, we make war, and we make love: a dynamic global economy has been constituted around the planet, linking up valuable people and activities from all over the world, while switching off from the networks of the power and wealth, people and territories dubbed as irrelevant from the perspectives of dominant interests."

While this aggressive phase of capitalism resulted in increasing economic growth in some countries and regions, its own logic ensures that millions of people and large parts of the world remain excluded from growth. Many areas have thus experienced a decline in national product as capital moves out of less profitable countries and regions. The social and economic consequences of this global search for profit inevitably leads to marginalising and excluding millions of people around the world. Africa is a prime example of such exclusion.

Castells (1999) explains the essence of corporate globalisation:

... this is a brand of capitalism that is at the same time very old and fundamentally new. It is old because it appeals to relentless competition in the pursuit of profit, and because individual satisfaction (deferred or immediate) is its driving engine. But it is fundamentally new because it is toolled by new information and communication technologies that are at the root of new productivity sources, new organizational forms, and the construction of a global economy.

Thus, while developments in technologies and science make it possible for rapid changes to be made, Africa lags behind. Yet possibilities exist in the world today, and within Africa, to bring about major changes in the way our societies - and information services - are organised. Possibilities exist in Africa today to put information at the service of people so

that they help them meet their real needs, and not for a (mostly foreign) elite to enrich itself on African labour and resources.

There are other aspects of globalisation and development of information technologies which affect the development of Africa.

Information society and knowledge economy in Africa

The term "Information Society" can be used to describe a society in which the "creation, distribution, and manipulation of information has become the most significant economic and cultural activity" (IBM Community Development Foundation, 1997)) which goes on to explain the terms further:

An Information Society may be contrasted with societies in which the economic underpinning is primarily industrial or agricultural. The tools of the Information Society are computers and telecommunications. Progress in information technologies and communication is changing the way people lead their lives, how they work and do business, how they educate their children, study, carry out research, train themselves and how they are entertained.

Africa needs to make the shift from reliance on agricultural and industrial activities to a society based on knowledge. The term "Knowledge Economy" refers to using the generation and exploitation of knowledge as a predominant player in the creation of wealth. Matsuura (2005) gives a background of the emergence of the knowledge economy and looks at the process of turning information into knowledge:

The scientific upheavals of the 20th century have brought about a third industrial revolution. This revolution, which has been accompanied by Globalization, has laid down the bases of a knowledge economy. Yet information is not knowledge; and the world information society will only fulfil its potential if it facilitates the emergence of pluralistic knowledge societies that include rather than exclude.

There is a clear awareness today that the development of societies predicated on the sharing of knowledge is the best way of waging effective war on poverty and forestalling major health risks such as pandemics, of reducing the terrible loss of life caused by tsunamis and tropical storms, and of promoting sustainable human development. For new modes of development are today within our grasp: these are no longer based, as in the past, on "blood, sweat and tears", but rather on intelligence, the scientific and technological capacity to address problems, intellectual added value, and the expansion of services in all sectors of the economy.

These "new modes of development" appear to be far away from African shores. Yet it is possible to turn the new potential into reality by using existing visions and commitments as well experiences from other countries. The Vision of the Information Society, as summed up in World Summit on Information Society, Civil Society (2003) is the one that best serves African interests:

We... declare our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting

their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We are aware that ICTs should be regarded as tools and not as an end in themselves. Under favourable conditions, these technologies can be a powerful instrument, increasing productivity, generating economic growth, job creation and employability and improving the quality of life of all. They can also promote dialogue among people, nations and civilizations.

We are also fully aware that the benefits of the information technology revolution are today unevenly distributed between the developed and developing countries and within societies. We are fully committed to turning this digital divide into a digital opportunity for all, particularly for those who risk being left behind and being further marginalized.

The above declaration surely provides a powerful weapon at an ideological level. Other developments at a political level can also support Africa's demand for an equal share in the new information and knowledge world. The political, economic and ethical developments in the "non-Western" world provide a more relevant experience and example for Africa. On the one hand is the rapid rise of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China). On the other hand is the experience from the principled stand taken in Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia which provides a real chance for improvement in the lives of working people. Both these are relevant models that Africa can use for real development. Changes in the information level cannot take place in a vacuum. It is changes at the economic and political level in these examples that provides the possibilities for change in the information field.

The rise of China

The rise of China as a major international economic and political power is rapidly changing our world today. Already it has become the sixth largest economy in the world and is likely soon to become the fourth. It has enormous potential for the future. The significance of the rise of China is not only at economic and political level, it has the potential for developing an entirely different moral framework for development, international relations and world outlook. Unlike previous super-powers which resorted to occupation of land and subjugating people in order to satisfy their need for resources, China sets about developing mutually beneficial relations with countries such as Brazil, India and other "developing" countries so that there is mutual benefit. It seeks no colonies nor to enslave or colonise people. As Jacques (2005) explains:

The past two or three years have marked a new moment in the global perception of China. There is suddenly a new awareness that encompasses both a recognition of China's economic transformation and an understanding that, because of its huge size and cohesive character, it will have a profound impact on the rest of the world, albeit in ways still only dimly understood ... China has arrived and will increasingly shape our future, not just its own.

Africa has much to gain from developing relations with China in a way which benefits people of both continents. It will set a new standard of moral, economic and political relations between peoples and countries.

The rise of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) as a whole provide a totally new global scene which can have tremendous impact on Africa. At an economic level, it challenges the monopoly of Western transnational companies to decide the terms of trade which have historically worked against Africa. Thus the objective condition for positive change has been set. It remains for Africa to take advantage of this positive development. But we do not have to look far for examples of how these global changes can be used in the interest of their people - there is an alternative way which increases social spending and turns away from free-market policies which have been imposed on Africa, causing increased poverty and stifling development.

There is an alternative

This alternative way of developing societies has been shown to work in Cuba, which, in spite of a USA-instigated blockade of over 40 years, is developing today at a highly enviable rate. Its GDP growth in 2005 was 11.8 percent - among the highest in the world. ("New Challenges and Victories Ahead", 2006). As an example in just one field, Cuba has become a major bio-medical power. Marx, Gary (2006) sums up Cuba's achievements:

Cuban scientists have produced a hepatitis B vaccine sold in more than 30 countries and streptokinase, a potent enzyme that dissolves blood clots and improves the survival rate of heart attack victims. The country also makes recombinant interferon that strengthens the immune system of cancer patients and a meningitis B vaccine.

In the pipeline are products ranging from an injection that closes ulcers and improves circulation in diabetics to vaccines against cholera and hepatitis C, according to Cuban officials.

Similar changes are taking place in Venezuela which is also following an alternative economic and political path to development of its people, using oil revenues to set up Universities, literacy and health care programmes for working people, and other social projects. Similarly, in Bolivia, major changes are expected once the new President, Evo Morales take office in January, 2006. What is perhaps more significant is that not only are these three countries taking the alternative path, but they are also developing an alternative support and co-operation structure among themselves and with other progressive countries. As O'Keefe (2005) says, "there is an alternative". He sums up the new situation:

Today, global capitalism is being challenged most directly in Venezuela. Hugo Chavez's own discourse has sharpened dramatically against international capital in recent months and years. The Bolivarian leader has made repeated calls for the building of 'socialism for the 21st century'.

The Bolivarian Revolution is carrying out a transformation of both the reality of Venezuela and of the global alignment of political forces. The gains of *el proceso* are preciously concrete, as seen in rising rates of literacy and education, mass expansion of health care services, land reform, new housing for the poor, and an explosion in cooperative worker co-managed enterprises. These reforms are part of a revolutionary process with a continental and global dynamic.

Such positive news about development can provide important examples to people of Africa, but our information services rarely provide such information to working people who need it the most. Such examples of development activities are highly relevant to Africa and perhaps the model of the "Community of South American Nations" may be a good one for Africa to follow.

A key requirement for development of Africa is a redrawing of the "information map" to reassess our information work. We need to assess the relevance of the sources of information we provide to the people and to review whose point of view such information reflects. We need to look afresh at the form and content of information in our libraries and look at what languages they cover. We need to see if the information is targeted correctly and review how outcomes are monitored. Our information needs to reflect Africa in a new perspective and reinterpret its history from the point of view of African working people. The world-view that people are daily presented by the Western media needs to be challenged for African people to see themselves as equal partners in a global context. An alternative vision and view of the world needs to be made available to *every* African. No people can develop under a situation of daily images of their own powerlessness and inadequacy, where facts about their exploitation are hidden and their suffering is shown as resulting from their own fault. In order to build our self-confidence we need to see the world from our own perspective in which the "other" is just that - the other.

Technological developments mentioned earlier already provide a basis for making this alternative position for Africa a reality. An example of this new way of thinking and doing is provided by the pioneering Pambazuka News, Weekly Forum for Social Justice for Africa. ("Pambazuka" means "arise" or "awaken" in Kiswahili). This is "a tool for progressive social change in Africa" and is produced by [Fahamu](#), "an organisation that uses information and communication technologies to serve the needs of organisations and social movements that aspire to progressive social change".

It is in initiatives such as this that African librarians need to get involved. We need to form new alliance with global movements such as the World Social Forum. Another area in which librarians need to be active is initiatives such as the pan-Latin American TV channel, Telesur, which, as Bruce (2005) reports, aims to "counter cultural imperialism, which the Channel's president, Andres Izaara said had gone unchallenged in the region for 50 years".

But a key requirement for ensuring a meaningful information change is to re-assess the social role of librarians and information workers. Too often we are satisfied with a very limited social role and have shied away from any active involvement in the political reality around us. But our so-called “neutrality” is not real neutral; it is, in effect, siding with the status quo which we reinforce if we do not challenge inequality and injustice.

Social role of librarians

“The people’s hour has arrived” said Bolivian President-elect Evo Morales while reiterating promises to recover Bolivia's natural resources, including natural gas, for all Bolivians (*Bolivia's Morales, Chavez Pledge to Strengthen Ties*, 2005). Such a programme for Africa is well overdue and needs active participation of information and community activists. Again, we need to work closely with progressive Pan African movements and activists, as the problems facing African can best be resolved on a continental-basis, and in partnership with others whose aims match ours.

Blake (1989) examined the role of librarians in very clear terms:

There are those who, clinging to the idea that the library profession should be politically neutral, would contend that contributing to social projects is not an appropriate activity for librarians. However, without a clear and vital set of philosophical and political ideals acting as a guiding beacon, the library profession will not remain neutral, but will drift aimlessly with the currents of power and privilege.

Librarians must forcefully articulate their commitment to serving the information needs of all segments of society. They must rededicate themselves to assuring the widest and most equitable access to information by opposing fees for services and the commercialization of knowledge. Furthermore, librarians must be willing to enter the political arena and advocate for these principles.

This call for involvement in the political arena is even more urgent in Africa today in view the changes taking place in the context of corporate globalisation and marketisation of services.

The rest of this paper looks at one attempt in the African information field to make a positive change in the way information services are managed and delivered.

Progressive African Library and Information Activists’ Group (PALIAct)

It is perhaps time for information professionals to move away from lamenting the situation to turning their ideas into action. The Progressive African Library and Information Activists’ Group (PALIAct) initiative is one such attempt. It was set up as a way of taking on board some of the issues raised above. It is being supported by the Department of Applied Social Sciences of the London Metropolitan University. It also has the potential to bring together

the African Diaspora with progressive people in the “West” to create a powerful partnership with the information professionals in Africa to develop innovative information services which can help develop people and communities.

PALIAct seeks to develop people-oriented information services decided upon by workers, peasants, pastoralists, fisher people and other marginalised individuals and groups whose needs have not been met. It involves working in partnership with other professionals and service providers. PALIAct operates on principles of equality, democracy and social justice and encourages a Pan African world outlook among information and community activists. PALIACT recognises the right to relevant information as a basic human right.

The struggle for a relevant information service is intimately linked with the political struggles of the people to meet their material, social, cultural and political needs. PALIAct believes that the opportunity for creating a people-orientated information service at the time of political independence was lost. Instead of challenging the very basis on which library and information services were built, we allowed ourselves to be manipulated into making merely quantitative changes in library services, but failed to make any qualitative changes. The *classes* who were served by the colonial library service continued to be served and the needs of working people who had always remained outside the remit of such services remained unmet. Their experiences, their cultures, their very language remained outside the walls of impressive library buildings. Thus the advantage gained in the early period of struggle for a society and an information system which served the needs of *all* its people was lost. The struggle for such an information service continues to date.

The PALIAct programme is therefore an activist agenda to ensure that the information rights of African people are recognised in theory as well as in practice. PALIAct will set up pilot projects in a number of countries to develop ideas and practices to develop people-orientated information services.

PALIAct aims relate directly to meeting the Millennium goals for development. One of the challenges identified at the World Summit on the Information Society is to “harness the potential of information and communication technology to promote the development goals of the Millennium Declaration” (World Summit on Information Society, 2003b). PALIAct provides one very practical answer to this challenge.

*PALIAct principles*¹

In its commitment to developing a people-orientated information service, PALIAct is committed to:

¹ Based on the Ten point program developed by Mark Rosenzweig for the groups which met at the Vienna Conference of progressive librarians sponsored by KRIBIBIE in 2000. Copyright Progressive Librarians Guild, 2000. <http://www.libr.org/PLG/>.

- The principles of social justice, equality, equity, human welfare, and the development of cultural and social democracy; thus we shall actively address historical inequalities in the information field in Africa;
- Achieving equality of access to and inclusiveness of information services, especially extending such services to the workers, peasants and the poor, the marginalized and those who have been discriminated against;
- The provision of a relevant service to those active in the struggles for social justice and who are working towards the creation of a liberated Africa;
- Supporting the collection, organization, preservation and dissemination of the documents of people's struggles in all forms and languages;
- Making available alternative materials representing a wide range of progressive viewpoints from within Africa and overseas and which are often excluded by traditional libraries, mass media and educational and information systems;
- Encouraging the exploration of alternative models of services; promoting and disseminating critical analysis of information technology's impact on libraries and societies; and support the fundamental democratization of existing institutions of education, culture, communications;
- Undertaking joint, interdisciplinary research into fundamental library issues (e.g. into the political economy of information in the age of neo-liberalism and corporate globalization) in order to lay the basis for effective action in our spheres of work;
- Investigating and organizing efforts to make the library-as-workplace more democratic and encourage resistance to the managerialism of the present library culture;
- Promoting international solidarity among librarians and cooperation between libraries across borders on the basis of our commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related covenants which create a democratic framework for constructive cooperative endeavours;
- Organizing in partnership with other activists in the cultural and educational fields, to help put issues of social responsibility on the agendas of international bodies such as IFLA and UNESCO;
- Opposing corporate globalization which, despite its claims, reinforces existing social, economic, cultural inequalities, and working towards the creation of a democratic globalism and internationalism which respects and cultivates cultural plurality, which recognizes the sovereignty of peoples, which acknowledges the obligations of society to the individual and communities, and which prioritizes human values and needs over profits.

PALIAct is discussing the possibilities of setting up pilot country centres in a number of countries. The experience gained in these pilots will help to develop further centres in other countries or regions of Africa. Such pilots require a committed group of local

information professionals willing and able to work with local communities. Discussions are taking place for setting up the first pilots in Ghana and Kenya.

The success of the PALIAct initiative will, in the end, be decided upon by how actively the information professionals in Africa support it. The ideas are ready to be implemented, but whether they will be taken up remains to be seen. They offer a possibility of reconciling the lives of Nyanjiru and Kamau in the story we heard earlier. I hope there will no longer be silence in the library.

A new beginning?

The year 2007 marks the bicentenary of the British Parliamentary abolition of the slave trade in the former British Empire. We hope to formally launch PALIAct at the IFLA Conference in South Africa in 2007. At the same time, it would be appropriate for the library profession in Africa to make it a year of change to rededicate and reorient information services to meet the needs of the majority of its people. It would be appropriate for countries which have benefited from African slave trade to support initiatives such as PALIAct as a small way of acknowledging their debt to Africa.

An African activist information programme

It is not within the scope of this presentation to discuss in detail what an activist information programme for Africa would or should look like. Such a programme will emerge when local information activists engage in the struggles of the people for their material and cultural rights. However, some possible direction for such a programme can be mentioned here:

Leadership development

No country, organisation or profession can expect to achieve its vision without developing its members in areas such as appropriate ideological awareness and orientation, an understanding of historical and current contradictions facing the country or organisation, a clarity about who and what their allies are in terms of achieving their goals, an understanding of organisational change brought about by innovation and creativity. The development of leadership requires that these theories are then reinforced by opportunities for practical work as a way of gaining experience which can give increased confidence to individuals as well as to organisations. It is only through such life-long learning programmes that there can be any hope of ensuring the sustainability required for long-term development.

These points were well understood in Kenya in the early 1960s when Pio Gama Pinto, Bildad Kaggia, Oginga Odinga and others set up the Lumumba Institute for developing political cadres. Those who killed the Institute (and Pinto) did a great disservice to the cause of African liberation. Today we can learn from this history and develop a thousand Lumumba Institutes as a way of developing our people to lead the war for African's second liberation which starts with liberating our minds.

A number of programmes being delivered or developed at the London Metropolitan University's Department of Applied Social Sciences are suitable for such a leadership programme. All of these are capable of being delivered in partnership with African Universities if there is interest. These include

- the Quality Leaders Project (QLP), "management development through service development" with its "combating racism, managing equality" and other project management modules
- various information management modules and short courses, including "leadership for innovation, equality and change", "information policy", "information and social exclusion", "information services for minority communities". The proposed new module "information for development and social justice" which would be of particular relevance in Africa.

Collection building

An important area that needs to be addressed urgently is the collection policy and practice of African libraries. Again, this is not the forum to go into this in detail, but the following needs to be addressed:

- Material from African liberation struggle. The enormous amount of oral and written material generated during the long history of African struggle against colonialism needs to be collected, documented and made available. Developments in information and communications technologies make this task easier than it was some years back. Part of this process is the need to get back from colonial countries the vast amount of African documents, material culture, and archives stored in London, Paris and other colonial capitals.
- Documents of the Pan African movement need to be included in the above, as do material on slavery whose effects Africa has not recovered from even today.
- Documentation on the policies and activities of organisations and leaders active in the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist movements (before and after independence) need to be made available through every public and University library in Africa. These should include organisations and leaders in every African country. For example, films on Lumumba and other anti-imperialist activists need to be collected or commissioned.

- African libraries seems to be flooded by material from a Western, imperialist point of view. There is a need to actively collect material from an alternative, people's, point of view. This should include material on the World Social Forum (WSF) as well as on the people's anti-globalisation movements. The WSF has already included library events as part of its programme for its meetings in Bamako (2006) and in Nairobi in 2007. Two representatives of the PALIAct Kenya Centre have been sponsored by the Finnish Foreign Ministry to attend the Bamako event.² It is important for African library professional to be actively involved in this important initiative. A large number of East, Central, and Southern African librarians need to attend the Nairobi meeting in January 2007.
- Material from a Pan-African and internationalist perspective. African libraries need to collect material from other African countries, organise a translation service to make material available to all, and promote major regional African languages throughout the continent (e.g. Kiswahili, Arabic, and Yoruba).
- Collections on social and economic development. Experiences on development in other parts of the world needs to be made available to African planners, teachers, lecturers, extension workers and others as a way of disseminating it to people. Thus experiences from China, Cuba, Venezuela and India should be actively collected.

The "liberating the mind" /"kuvunja minyororo"³ collections

As a practical way of putting some of these ideas into action, I would like to suggest that a new information partnership be set up in interested countries, under the name "Liberating the mind" /"kuvunja minyororo" partnership.

Key partners would include the local PALIAct country centre, a local University and the public library service. Other organisations such as Museums, Archives, and relevant Government ministries would also be able to join the partnership. International organisations such as the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), the African Union, UNESCO etc could be invited as partners. The national partnerships would have representation in a continent-wide partnership.

The "liberating the mind" service would collect and disseminate the material mentioned above. It should include "audience development"⁴ approach taken by the Quality Leaders

² Details about these events are available from the WSF website mentioned in the Bibliography.

³ "Kuvunja minyororo" - Kiswahili for "to break the chains".

⁴ The QLP approach identifies 2 aspects under the term "audience development":

- The first aspect is to increase the reach of libraries and youth services to meet the needs of all young people, particularly refugees and asylum seekers and those who have not been reached before.
- The second aspect expands on what has come to be known as "reader development". However, the term "audience development" is preferred to "reader development". "Audience development" is a more inclusive term: it includes people who may have visual impairment and meets the needs of disabled people generally. It includes people who may not be literate either in English or in their

project and develop activities in areas such as film, radio, music, drama all of which can be developed in partnership with other professionals. As a start, each country should have at least one library designated as a “liberating the mind” centre. A start can be made, for example, by making available material recommended by the World Social Forum as relevant for Africa. It would be in a language appropriate to the country and be in paper as well as electronic format.

This Conference can set up a working party to take these ideas forward, if there is sufficient interest. This proposed partnership can set the African librarian free from the colonial shackle and can finally re-emerge with a new, socially-responsible role. The future is ours to make.

own languages. It also allows for connecting people to the “reading experience” through non print media, such as arts, cinema, music, drama and other cultural activities. It involves all the senses, rather than being restricted to the use of just one.

The “audience development” approach to library and youth work develops new areas of service provision which a “traditional” library may not have provided as mainstream activities. Over a period of time, this approach will help to develop a new model of joined-up library-youth service.

Audience development workshops: These workshop sessions are perhaps the most innovative part of the programme. The sessions are programmed to reflect the specific aspects that the young people themselves decide meet their needs. They thus need to be flexible in order to be tailored to local requirements. They will also enable young people themselves to be the providers of such sessions, rather than being merely passive recipients of a service provided by an “outsider”. At the same time, the programme will enable outside skills, ideas and expertise to be brought into the local youth communities, thereby injecting new and different ideas on the local scene.

The QLP-Y programme will provide regular workshop sessions in each of the 2 years of the life of the Project. This will enable activities such as:

- presentations from writers, poets, film makers, media and other professionals
- music workshops, book and newsletter production sessions, broadcast workshops, film making modules
- various informal learning experiences
- ICT-related activities
- guest speakers from different fields as a way of enabling the young people to meet potential role models from diverse communities and from different fields.

Until the project requirements are worked out in some detail in consultation with the youth themselves, it is not possible to be any more specific than this. It is expected that these sessions will attract young people, who may never have used library or youth services, to be active participants in new service which they themselves help design and deliver.

The Workshops are incorporated in the QLP-Y on the basis that the learning and social needs of young people can be met more meaningfully as part of a cultural and social programme so as to avoid a feeling of “school out of school”. The crucial element will be the empowerment of young people so that it is they who decide on the type of activity they are comfortable with.

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shiraz
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SCECSAL XVII

The XVII Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library and Information Professionals (SCECSAL XVII) will be hosted by the Tanzania Library Association (TLA) in Dar es Salaam on 10-14 July 2006. 'This conference will bring together some 500 delegates from all over the world, most will be from Africa. SCECSAL's conference and exhibition is the biggest African event for professionals within the library and information sector ... The theme for the SCECSAL Conference is: LIBRARIES as a bridge to information and knowledge society.'

[Conference Web site](#)

(Source: ifla-l mailing list, 14 November 2005).