

**THE POVERTY OF LIBRARIANSHIP:
NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICES OF ANGLOPHONE AFRICA
IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA**

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THE IDEA

The title of this paper reverses the title of Kingo Mchombu's seminal article 'On the librarianship of poverty'. (Mchombu, 1982) In doing so it mimics Marx's reversal of Proudhon's 'Philosophy of Poverty' into his own 'Poverty of Philosophy'. However, I have no wish to display the 'carping, vicious superiority of a man who prides himself on his academic learning' that Marx turned on Proudhon, or to be seen to be 'laying down the law with blistering sarcasm' as Marx certainly did to Proudhon. (Woodcock, 1956 p.101) The intention is rather to extend or complement the argument that Mchombu developed. He suggested that librarianship when practiced in African needed to be adapted to the poverty that was the most influential of the prevailing circumstances. The theme of this paper will be that the librarianship of the African National Library Services revealed such a poverty of ideas and such an inability to adapt, that it needed, and still needs, to be replaced with a much more radical approach. First, however, it is necessary to explain the National Library Services and show the background from which they emerged.

It is nowadays more or less universally the practice in the former British colonies and protectorates in Africa to have a National Library Service that incorporates the main aspects of both public and national libraries. The countries to which this generalisation is applied, wholly or in part, for the purposes of this paper are Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia. The origin of the idea seems fairly simple. The various territories administered by Britain had in by the time of the Second World War virtually no publicly provided library services. A need for libraries was, however, recognized to an extent within the colonial administrations. Schooling was being made increasingly widely available to the population so as to produce workers and minor officials better able to contribute to the prosperity and efficiency of the territory. In this way, it was believed, the colonies could be increasingly self-administered (at considerably less expense than by a wholly British administrative service), but continue to produce high levels of revenue for the colonial power. However, an increasingly literate population needed things to read

and libraries were a cost-effective way of providing them with access to books and periodicals. The expense of providing a complete pattern of libraries, including national, public, school, college and research libraries, was clearly too great in the short term. Therefore setting up some kind of national Library Board, which would gradually develop specific services as need manifested itself and funds were available was a logical response. Although it was generally the intention that such boards would concentrate first on some form of public library service, there was usually a plan including eventually a recognizable national library.

ORIGINS OF THE IDEA

The earliest appearance of a well articulated version of the idea seems to have been in the rather untypical social circumstances of the then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1928. Dugald Niven, the long-serving librarian of an old-established institution (Bulawayo Public Library, founded in 1896) suggested to the Carnegie Corporation of New York that the country needed a form of national library system. This would include 'a central library, acting as a national lending library for schools and a central reference library'. (Made, 1985 p.53) By 1943, in response to his promptings, a National Free Library Service had been set up with Carnegie financial assistance and was operating from Bulawayo. In 1951 a report by D.H. Varley (then Librarian of the South African Library in Cape Town) recognized its role of this library as part of a wider national service. Varley's report set out in clear terms the idea originally put forward by Niven. He suggested:

- A central point of organization directed by a qualified and experienced librarian, together with the necessary trained staff, responsible to an advisory policy board, in turn responsible to a minister of state.
- One or more comprehensive libraries of reference containing not only all the material relating to the country concerned, but also the best works relating to all other countries, in whatever language.
- One main centre, and if necessary subsidiary centres, where the total book resources of the country, other than fiction, can be recorded and through which loans can be effected either from these centres, or through inter-loan, from any point in the system.

This has rather a flavour of what was actually already available, or obviously possible, in Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi) which were soon to be joined in a short-lived federation. The important thing to remember here is, however, the subtext. The systems discussed were thought of as basically for whites, with possibly some access for coloureds, Asians and maybe even some educated blacks.

Despite the idea having been given clear expression in Rhodesia, the system there remained comparatively fragmented. Ironically this did not change notably until after independence in 1980. Since then Zimbabwe seems rather to have reaffirmed Niven's vision and Varley's development of it. The convening of the National Library and Documentation Council in 1982 was certainly an expression of the national library

services idea, whether it was drawn from its Rhodesian origins or not. Sadly the Zimbabwean National Library and Documentation Service has never succeeded in filling the gaps in national provision and has, indeed, presided over the sad decline of the National Free Library Service. However, the point here is that the idea can first be identified in Rhodesia. Unfortunately the tidiness of this identification of the source may be illusory, since there is no obvious indication that Rhodesia was actually an inspiration to the other countries that took up the idea. Rhodesia was a settler country with tens of thousands of residents of European origin. It tended to be attached to South Africa for many purposes, and it is an interesting question as to how far ideas were exchanged between it and the more northern British colonies in Africa in which Europeans were generally a tiny, though utterly privileged minority.

NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE IN GHANA

It seems to be the case that the national library service idea as developed and adopted in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in the 1940s and 50s was arrived at independently. The Ghanaian experience was also certainly much more influential in others of the more northerly African countries. Library activity in the British West African colonies had been stimulated to a surprising extent by the investigations carried out by Ethel Fegan, of Cambridge University, from 1941 to 1942. Her report led the British Council to send two librarians to the region in 1944, one of whom was Fegan herself and the other her cousin Kate Ferguson. Their energy and commitment gave libraries a place in the colonial agenda, but it was Evelyn Evans, who arrived as a British Council Librarian in the Gold Coast in 1945, who was the most significant influence. For five years she campaigned for library services in the Gold Coast like the public libraries she had known in Britain. Her accounts of her journeys up and down the country with her travelling collection of 2,000 books give a strong sense of her delight in this adventure. She talked to chiefs and educationalists, collected relevant information and showed off the qualities of her small sample library. (Evans, 1964)

This she later presented as an investigation, the results of which were the basis for the library system she then advocated. However, as Edward Sydney (a former President of the Library Association) put it in his introduction to her book, without obviously intending to be ironical, 'She must have done her thinking and her choosing at great speed'. (Evans, 1964. P.xv) The book contains her list of seven 'Suggested steps in the planning of a public library service in a developing territory. (Evans p165) This progresses from the appointment of a Library Advisory Committee, through to the appointment of the Library's staff. Step two is 'a survey by a qualified and experienced librarian' which would include - distribution of population, pattern of literacy, schools and educational facilities, the state of roads and transport facilities. Although this does not exclude the collection of other data, it is a very limited list that does not even pay lip service to user needs and preferences. The utility of a library as defined by Evans is clearly taken as given. What she was doing on her tours was not a dispassionate investigation of possible solutions to the problem of providing for the reading needs of the Gold Coast population. She was simply promoting the Anglo-American public library

idea and seeking information that would enable her to provide such services according to her own plans. Evans' campaign of persuasion was successful and in 1950 the Gold Coast Library Board was set up, with herself as Chief Librarian.

The pattern she instituted was clear and simple. First of all, she was convinced that the service had to be nationally administered. Local administration neither sufficiently well organised, nor financially independent enough to permit the running of effective libraries. Secondly it had to be provided throughout the nation's territory. The motto of the service was 'Books to the People' and this meant fully diffused services, rather than centres of excellence or pilot projects. The service took over the British Council's book box system, and the Department of Education's postal book loans to teachers. A mobile library was built and began touring the country. Fixed service points were, however, not opened until suitably trained staff was ready to take over. The emphasis was on what Evans called 'a proper library service', and her success in providing such a service was impressive. After five years there were seven libraries open full-time, three children's libraries in Accra, a regional library in Kumasi and various other developments. In 1960 the system was extended to include the first element of what could be recognized as a traditional national library, in the Padmore Research Library. This was intended eventually to become the Africana section of Ghana's national library. The service thrived for some years and enjoyed the patronage of the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, who opened libraries and made supportive speeches. By the early 1970's the headquarters library in Accra was at the centre of a system of regional, district and branch libraries, all complemented by mobile libraries and book box service to remote areas.

Unfortunately the country's economic disaster of the 1970s and subsequent years has left the system devastated, but so far as it went, it was a triumphant expression of an idea. The validity of this idea will be questioned in more detail in the next section, but Evans' wider influence is easy to identify. When in 1952 Yvonne Oddon toured African libraries on behalf of UNESCO, she considered the Gold Coast as the only country she visited in which libraries for the public had progressed anything beyond the earliest stage of development. (Olden, 1995, p.11) This was important because her tour was a preparation for one of a UNESCO-sponsored series of seminars on public libraries held in various cities throughout the world. This was to be the fourth and it took place in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1953. Its proceedings have been extremely influential in Africa during succeeding years both as a statement of principle and a description of conditions at the time. (UNESCO, 1954) In particular, a West African Library Association was formed to promote the principles discussed at Ibadan. As channels for the influence of Evans' national library idea, the Seminar and the WALA were obviously important.

That influence can be seen spreading through West Africa even before the Seminar. For instance, a Sierra Leone white paper on Educational Development in 1950, called for a national library; country-wide public library service; and the supply of books to schools and colleges. The Sierra Leone Library Board was set up as a response to this in 1959 and Evelyn Evans was asked to carry out a survey of libraries and make proposals for development. It was her report that was then used to plan the national library service. (Dillsworth, 1990) In an even more concrete way, the influence of the Gold Coast Library

Board Ordinance of 1949 can be seen in its role as a model for the legislation of a number of other countries. Only Nigeria seems to have taken a distinctly different route. Its federal organisation has placed responsibility for public libraries at state level, and it is unusual in the region in having had a true national library since 1964, when a National Library Act was passed.

NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE IN EAST AFRICA

When in 1959 the British Council appointed a Libraries Development Organiser for Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda, their choice was S.W. Hockey, who came from a similar British public library background to that of Evans. He can scarcely have failed to be aware of Evans' work and ideas, if only indirectly through documents like the proceedings of the Ibadan seminar. His report, issued at the end of the following year, (Hockey, 1960) set the tone and pace for development in East Africa and set it firmly in the national library service pattern. His influence then continued in a very direct way as Hockey then remained in the region, until 1970 when he left to become Director of the Swaziland National Library Service. In the report he recommended the setting up of national library services, administered by statutory boards. The systems should consist of national central libraries in the capital cities, provincial or regional libraries, district libraries, small branches and bookmobiles. As he explained at a later date:

The organisation of an adequate service to scattered communities is a relatively expensive and complicated job, and it can only be done effectively by first establishing well-organised and properly equipped bases, from which the tenuous network of mobile stops and village centres can be supplied and supervised. (Hockey, 1971, p.167)

The language of this passage is instructive. It rather echoes Evans' references to 'a proper library service' (Evans, 1966, p.8) and her sense that services should only be made available to the public after full preparation.

Hockey drafted a Tanganyika Library Services Board Act, based on the Gold Coast Library Board Act, and it was passed in 1963. It was followed by a Ugandan Public Libraries Act in 1964 (Kigongo-Bukenya, 1990) and a Kenyan National Library Service Board Act in 1965 (Pala, 1971). Thus in a relatively short period, the national library service approach was completely dominant in the region. The first Director of the Tanganyika Library Service, Max Broome, was British, once again with a public library background. Taking his tone from Hockey, his first concern was to get the administration of the system working to his satisfaction and for approximately 12 months there were few if any new services to readers. At the same time, however, he stressed the urgency of need and the lack of time in which to meet it, suggesting that-

We must be prepared to cut corners, to operate without the necessary data and basic information, to make assumptions that one would never dare to make in Europe. (Broome, 1966b)

There is self-contradiction here, and a little earlier he had written of this fallow-seeming period in something of an apologetic tone. (Broome, 1964) That probably reflects an awareness of criticism, and criticism there was indeed.

The most significant source of criticism, amounting almost to a refutation of the approach shared by Evans, Hockey, Broome and expatriate librarians, came from within East Africa. William Serwadda, a young Ugandan, had worked as a library assistant at Makerere University between 1955 and 1957. At that point he had gone to study in Britain, completing a programme at Library School and becoming an Associate of the Library Association (ALA). Interestingly he had not made an immediate return, but had stayed in Europe taking the opportunity to make what he called extensive tours of libraries in continental Europe, including Scandinavia. When he returned he published a short article in the East African Library Association Bulletin that contained a statement of his beliefs. In this he affirmed his faith in libraries as a sort of powerhouse in the struggle against illiteracy, disease and ignorance. However, his distinctive contribution was the thought that -

The main duty of librarians in East Africa is to set out to learn what the society wants, and then try to satisfy that want in terms of a library service, specially designed to meet the country's needs, [and] fit ideally our own environment. (Serwadda, 1964 p.11)

This may look at first reading to be the same thing as Evans' 'survey by a qualified and experienced librarian', but it certainly was not. Evans and her spiritual successors were clear in their minds about what a library was. It was just like an English county library. Serwadda was open to the possibility that it might be something quite different. Indeed he suggests that the East African librarian had a duty to 'get away from the traditional concept of British librarianship which puts stress on book service' towards a service based on the extension concept.

Two things followed. First, the hostility of those already in positions of influence was aroused. Hockey responded in defence of a book-centred service in the next issue of the journal, prophesying that it would be justified by swift increases in the number of users. Second, Serwadda was appointed as first Director of the Ugandan library services, after the resignation of an appointee who never took up the post. This was in July 1964, only six months after returning to the country. He started with clearly stated principles, but little knowledge of the structure he was to manage. As he put it,

I had heard of the Hockey Plan. But nobody seemed to have seen the plan. Whether it was packed in my predecessor's luggage, or thrown in the waste-paper basket, goodness knows. (Serwadda, 1966, p.26)

This levity undoubtedly added to his unpopularity in established circles, as did the plan he developed, after a hasty exploration of 'the country's needs and problems'. This rejected the ponderous approach hitherto favoured, and sought a swift expansion of

service points to be followed by a new emphasis on exploiting radio as a medium of communication to non-literates. He moved fast, experimented, and by his own admission made mistakes. The mistakes might or might not have been disastrous, but Serwadda was later described as having 'no political base' and without protection he was vulnerable. In November 1966, not much more than two years after being appointed he was dismissed. He is described as expanding the service too fast.

The result was the mushrooming of branches all over the country, inconsistent with available resources, and hence leading to poor library accommodation, furniture and equipment, and book stock. (Kigongo-Bukenya, 1990, p.132)

An enquiry, under a clergyman, the Rev. Tom Nabete, sought ways out of the difficulties, but this and subsequent enquiries failed to solve Uganda's library problems. In fact they retreated into the most obvious kind of orthodoxy, seeing the problems as centred on,

The lack of a National Library building for the deposit of national literature and from where the Library Service can be conveniently operated. (Nabete, 1966)

Serwadda's critique of the existing national library services was not, however, entirely isolated.

At the East African Library Association conference in 1965 Broome had felt it necessary to counter what was being said in 'some circles in the United Kingdom' about expatriate librarians.

These people tend to criticise the British librarians for what appears to be an unthinking reproduction of British library practice in an alien setting. Borrowing their techniques from the social research workers, the economic analysis, and the market survey experts they advocate a completely fresh approach to the problem - a careful analysis at grass roots level. (Broome, 1966a, p.18)

It would be interesting to know who the members of these 'circles' were, but the present paper itself is evidence that their critique won't go away. Broome's counter to this line of assault was that the situation was urgent, people were desperate for books. Provision of libraries was anyway an act of faith, and that it was better to test the market rather than open dozens of service points in temporary premises, which would be 'unforgiveable'. This is not a strong line of argument. The survey was there in Evans' 'steps', merely inadequately developed. Arguably part of Serwadda's problem was that he did not take sufficient time and care over his survey. Deep and detailed local knowledge was surely indispensable, when working in conditions quite new to formal information and library provision. Certainly the need was urgent, but attempting to fulfil it with only imperfect knowledge of the form the need took was not wise, and indeed Broome had not shrunk from taking time over setting up what he felt were appropriate services. The case against the national library services is that they were not truly appropriate to African circumstances, and that however tentatively they might have been introduced they were

still extensions of what was known and loved in mid-century Britain. 'Acts of faith' and 'assumptions that one would never dare to make in Europe' were just not good enough.

The reproduction of British library practice was not 'unthinking', but it occurred and just because it had been thought about quite carefully didn't make it more appropriate. This is the 'poverty of librarianship' referred to in the title of this paper. Arguably the librarianship of the period was not in a fit state to export. Indeed Michael Harris has argued precisely that in relation to US librarianship, and his remarks ring true if applied to the state of British ideas. He suggested that public librarians were,

Less and less able to provide reasons for the processes that were being performed in their libraries....most had completely lost sight of the founders' vision, and the few who could see it had lost their faith in its potential for fulfillment. (Harris, 1978, p.49)

Amongst other evidences of the staleness of British librarianship at the time, one could cite the setting up of the Institute of Information Scientists in 1958. Information professionals in the industrial and business sectors were convinced that the librarianship offered little if anything to support innovative, proactive services for a fast developing information sector. The same sentiment could also have been applied to librarianship and the information needs of the African colonies and newly independent states.

If we ask how well the systems that were set up throughout the continent on the national library services principle succeeded, the answer is depressing. The very widespread failure of the systems to thrive has been set out in some detail elsewhere. (Olden, 1995) (Rosenberg, 1993) Many of their difficulties can certainly be said to arise from circumstances wholly beyond their control. Librarians cannot be held responsible for natural disasters, coups, and the economic mismanagement of nations. But even in such conditions as these, there is a suspicion that the libraries were unduly vulnerable. The librarians' concern with 'proper' organisation (full cataloguing and good library furniture) rendered their libraries open to economic vicissitudes in a way that a sparer, more community-oriented service would not have been.

NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICES SINCE THE 1960s

Both the most strongly stated indigenous case for the national library services, and the most devastating critique have emerged from Tanzania. The case developed by Kaungamno and Ilomo (1979) in their Books build nations was that because the industrialized countries had long recognized the value of library and information services in national development, African countries should learn the same lesson and follow suit. The second volume of the book was an impressive description and justification of all types of library service in Tanzania. The authors did not shirk discussion of the problems experienced in the country, but time and time again their arguments were built on experience and ideas derived from the industrialized countries. The chief problem with the book, and what it described, was that neither was radical in circumstances that

desperately demanded radical solutions. The critique was that developed by Mchombu, and it centred round the allegation that by about 1980 the library services were serving as little as 1% of the population. (Mchombu, 1982) Because this tiny minority was also already the most privileged part of the population, the library services were unjust as well as ineffective. It is on this basis that he set out his proposal for the reorientation of services towards serving the poor and working effectively within the constraints of institutional poverty.

This question, introduced by Mchombu, of the reach that the libraries achieved, is vitally important. Hockey, in a response to Serwadda, had suggested what he clearly thought a modest target for the potential user community of the type of library he was promoting.

With the vast education programmes now going forward, I would hazard a guess that these potential users amount to at least 20% of the population, increasing rapidly. (Hockey, 1965)

This has just not materialised and the libraries have, almost everywhere, remained ineffective and on the margins of society. A recent bibliographic survey of the national library services (Issak, 2000) speaks of conditions that are 'very poor', of 'serious problems', 'financial difficulties' 'dramatic decline', 'alarming deterioration', low morale', and 'lack of motivation'. In summary, it identifies major problems centring on: declining government funding (and over-dependence on donor-funding); weak book publishing and distribution sectors; 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; and consequently questionable sustainability.

Issak lists hundreds of items that illustrate this case, such as a story from the Kenya Times of January 7th 1995 'National library in shambles' which talks of inaccessible libraries with irrelevant stocks and no funds to acquire new materials. What this means at a more local level, is shown by a story in the East African Standard of June 4th 1999, 'Kisii library ceiling a threat' which talks of the danger to readers of a collapsing ceiling that has not been repaired despite complaints. Examples of this kind could be multiplied over and over again, both from published sources and from the experiences of a frequent visitor to African libraries. Whilst the visitor will often find a library full of children doing their homework between large empty bookshelves, the instances when a wider cross section of the population can be seen using an adequate collection are rarer. A particularly dispiriting sight is a library workroom with no sign of newly arrived acquisitions and a row of cataloguers dozing at their desks, not able to perform their function, but not redeployed to useful tasks either. When Mchombu wrote, he estimated that 60% of national library service budgets went on salaries and that other non-book expenditure took up the major proportion of what remained. What the national library services do have is staff, buildings and systems of work. What they have less of is reading material and relevant services.

The roots of the library's vulnerability to neglect are actually visible in a well-governed country with balanced budget, such as Botswana. (Dale, 1971) The catastrophic decline of basic library services has never occurred there and the libraries of Botswana National Library Service have a satisfying air of 'normality'. However, normality means pleasant well designed libraries with collections that would not disgrace an English county library branch, but with very few users actually exploiting the type of provision that has been made. To give the Botswana library service proper credit it must, however, be recorded that they have been well aware of this for many years and have been at the forefront of experimentation with less formal services. Whilst the library history of Botswana has been comparatively trouble free, most of the other countries discussed in the present paper have experienced devastating turbulence. They have, however, survived and can emerge again to perform a useful function.

To take the example of Kenya again, many of the remarks addressed to the systems already discussed could also be applied to the Kenya National Library Service. (Rosenberg, 1993) However, it is now experimenting with some fresh ideas. There are libraries built with funds raised jointly between the library service and the local community. Income is being generated from book-binding, printing and photocopying. The national library service is associated with an AIDS awareness project which repackages and translates information from foreign sources. There are book box services to student groups, transported by bicycle and more spectacular than any of this are the 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 British newspapers. Certainly this has more than a suspicion of window dressing, but it promotes a fresh and more relevant product. Certainly there are signs that this new approach is not yet fully internalised. A statement like 'According to the Director of KNLS, a library is a foreign concept in most parts of the country; therefore there is a need to market the concept' (Issak, 2000, p.138) is not wholly logical. What is needed is an African concept that can be marketed with confidence, not a foreign concept that has to be promoted to a sceptical public.

THE FUTURE OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICES

When Douglas Varley, by then Librarian of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, returned to the country in 1963 after attending a UNESCO seminar on 'Public library development in Africa' at Enugu, Nigeria, he was clearly full of the messages that emerged from the proceedings. He identified the mission of African library services as concerning,

How to equip the people at large, and in time, with a progressive understanding of the cataclysmic social and technological changes which they are fated to undergo in the second half of this already cataclysmic twentieth century. (Varley, 1963, p.6)

His use of the word cataclysmic might, at the time, have seemed excessive, but subsequent events have fully justified it. This is the kind of sentiment with which few of the librarians then practicing in Anglophone Africa, British or British trained, would have failed to agree. However, the availability of suitable human resources to achieve it was even then seen as in question. As Varley put it,

Librarians tend to divide themselves into two groups: those with a flair to collect and conserve, and those with an urge to distribute, disseminate, and, in brief, communicate the materials and tools of their trade. (Varley, 1963, p.9)

In fact the problem was not quite that simple. The real difficulty was that even the communicators, amongst whom Evans, Broome and their colleagues should certainly be included, did not necessarily have the vision to break away from their professional heritage.

They put systems in place that failed to withstand the testing circumstances that came in the 1970s and 80s, but worse than this, they and their contemporaries in Britain trained a generation of African librarians preoccupied with their professional inheritance and ill-equipped to look to the future. A whole generation of senior librarians now in post in Anglophone Africa learned their library science first on training programmes put on by their employers in the national library services, and then (if they were fortunate) at the library schools of Britain. Hardly any of them studied in the USA and only an isolated individual or two attended programmes in the Soviet Union or India. What they absorbed was the largely unquestioned orthodoxy passed on by lecturers whose own chief experience was in British libraries of one kind or another. The determinedly theoretical bent of European and some American library science educators can be terribly tedious. What it does offer, however, is a possible route into unorthodoxy and innovation. This is lacking in the atheoretical British psyche and, more particularly, was almost entirely absent the horribly earthbound library education available in Britain during the 60s and 70s.

As instance of this weakness, a sad plea from a Ghanaian librarian, recently published in an international newsletter, outlines the difficulties experienced by the libraries of his country since the setting up of the national library service. It then goes on to list the main functions of a true national library (collects the nation's literature, acts as a centre for union catalogues, handles the allocation of ISBNs, produces a current national bibliography, and develops cataloguing standards, etc.). Then, clearly convinced that this type of activity would somehow address the difficulties the author had previously mentioned, he concludes that 'It is now clear why it is important to establish a National Library in Ghana'. (Obeng, 1999, p.8) This kind of massive non sequitor is sadly typical of the thinking of quite a few inheritors of the British tradition. If a nation decides for itself that it wants a national library, then it should go ahead and create one. Indeed, Namibia (a new entrant into the British Commonwealth, and an anglophone country by fully considered choice) has opened a lovely new national library in 2000. This will certainly make a major contribution to the development of research and scholarship in the

country. What it is unlikely to do is to make a direct and immediate contribution to the solution of the pressing problems experienced by the common people.

The national library services do, however, seem to offer possibilities of precisely that kind. The contention here is that they have failed to do this to any appreciable degree. It is further argued that such reliance on them is a symptom of an intellectual poverty that has looked to the solution of Africa's most urgent problems from stale and irrelevant British experience. Librarianship certainly has illusions to offer, but it has offered little by way of fresh inspiration. Its poverty as a paradigm for information service in Africa has been proven by the test of time and its replacement is overdue. What should replace it is still the subject of debate. (Sturges and Neill, 1998) In the year 2000 an opportunity to take that debate several steps further is to be offered by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Carnegie money to improve African public libraries is a marvelous opportunity for careful experimentation and investigation. Let us hope that it will be spent well.

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