What's wrong with Africanisation!

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Abstract

The birth of the African Library and Information Association and Institutions provides

an opportunity to re-visit the idea of Africanisation. Five things that are wrong with

Africanisation are identified and discussed.

Keywords

Africanisation, African Library and Information Association and Institutions,

modernisation.

Ideas about cultural relevance, indigenisation, and modernisation will continue to

feature in discussions about Africanisation. To the problematic ideological discourse

should be added practical challenges that raise questions about its usefulness. I will

identify and discuss briefly five things that I think are wrong about Africanisation.

First is that there is no pure or essential African identity. This was implied in a

question asked at the African Library Summit in Pretoria in July 2013 that announced

the birth of the African Library and Information Association and Institutions (AfLIA),

and whose recently-launched website explains what it is all about. A delegate

wanted to know how AfLIA would deal with membership for diasporic Africans, and sketched the special experiences of African-American librarians, cautioning that we cannot ignore a world-wide African library community. Professional collegiality beyond the continent therefore necessitates that AfLIA applies both new technology and new ideology. To its credit, the AfLIA seeks among other things to be an "*international…* organization, which pursues the interests of library and information associations, library and information services, librarians and information workers and the communities they serve" (Introductory brief; emphasis added).

Second, Africanisation is often seen as contrasting Afrocentrism with Eurocentrism. In this dichotomy, Africa is viewed in naïve terms as being culturally, politically, linguistically, and religiously monolithic. The African philosopher, Hountoundji (1983: 66), sagely reminds us about the simple and obvious truth that "Africa is above all a continent and the concept of Africa an empirical, geographical concept and not a metaphysical one". Ironically, there is a view that as a concept Africa has a European origin and that its definition was given by Europeans (Wallerstein 1991). Waves of migration, episodes of colonialism, and increasing globalisation have resulted in networks of language, culture, politics, trade, and religion that bind Africa with the rest of the world. Even the initial arrogance of some expatriate librarians moderated after their experiences in different African countries. Reflecting on its libraries and culture in *The Library Association Record*, a British librarian acknowledged in 1964 that Africa is not the lifeless receptacle of alien ideas but instead an "organism which absorbs only as much as it needs for its own growth" (Edwards 1964).

Third, the global dimension of library and information work in Africa is apparent in supportive international organizations, as well as the continent's socio-cultural history of literacy. Well-known is the work, among others, of Unesco, IFLA, FID, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Canadian agency CIDA, the Swedish agency SIDA, the Finnish Library Association, and the international development charity INASP (the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications). Less well-known is how since early times the cross-fertilisation of cultures promoted the growth of literacy in several regions of Africa. From as far back as the eleventh century, with a high point in the sixteenth century, trade between Arabs and Africans stimulated the production of manuscripts in Timbuktu and encouraged the growth of its libraries. Going back even further is the Libyan script, an African native alphabet, which was used to write down ancient Libyan. Found on tombstones, it dates back more than two thousand years and is still used today by the Tuareg in its current form as the Tifinagh language (Le Quellec 2011: 8). These are just some indications of the hybrid ways in which information was produced, organised, and distributed in Africa.

Fourth, universalism is at the heart of the ideas of several scholar-librarians. This ethos runs through their philosophical reflections on libraries, ranging from Paul Otlet's and Henri La Fontaine's bibliographic dreams to Louis Shores' encyclopaedic aspirations for librarianship. The interconnectedness of cultures and humanity characterise their thought and work. In South Africa, Jéan Gideon Kesting (1990: 1) explained that discussions on Western or African models for library services should not assume that they are "forests of existence which not only lack common roots now, but are destined to be divided eternally. What should unite structures of apparent division is the realisation of a common heritage of a single complex of

functions which typifies our task as intermediaries in the transmission of knowledge".

A perusal of compendia of intellectual insights produced by scholar-librarians across the world reveals similar ideas (Kesting 1989; Nitecki 1995).

Fifth, there are several visions of Africa, leading to the question of which Africa we want. Should it be the Africa of Thabo Mbeki's 'African renaissance'? Should it be the Africa of Muammar Gadaffi, or Seretse Khama, or Robert Mugabe? If Africanisation continues to occupy the minds of information professionals in Africa and elsewhere as a process worth taking seriously, then these five points cannot be ignored. It should, if developed further, uphold "the pursuit of excellence with a clear sensitivity to locatedness, relevance and impact" (Maluleke 2013: 97). Or, the emphasis should fall on modernising instead of Africanising. This would expect African information professionals simply to do new things well, as they would naturally do as Africans when relating to each other and their work.

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