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Libraries are not neutral

A pocket-sized guide to libraries and their colonial legacy

Image: Wills Memorial Library, University of Bristol, Author’s own photograph
Part 1: Libraries in Colonialism

Libraries, as extensions of educational facilities, are “instruments of enlightenment, hoping to spread knowledge and culture broadly to the people.” (Biven-Tatums, 2012, quoted in Ettarh, 2018).

While spreading “knowledge and culture” may seem a noble aim, it’s crucial we recognise that a facet of colonialism was to dismantle local knowledge, supressing the knowledge, language and traditions of the cultures it encountered in order to replace them. Libraries played a role in this. (Mutonga and Okune, 2022).

Colonialism was so detrimental to cultures with oral traditions (CILIP London, 2020), that the worship of the written word can be seen as a characteristic of white supremacy. (Chiu, Ettarh and Ferretti, 2021 p:62).
Despite evidence of pre-colonial lending libraries in Indonesia, Fitzpatrick (2008) tells us the purpose of the Dutch Government's Bureau for Popular Reading (Balai Pustaka), which combined publishing house and public library system, was three-fold:

1. create a literate workforce for manufacturing

2. reduce interest in public performances of traditional stories, which sometimes satirized Dutch rule

3. teach the “right” values to the local population: acceptance of Dutch rule, cleanliness, dependency, efficiency, punctuality, and consumption of goods

“These novels consciously undermined tradition and guided their readers toward positions as salaried consumers in the new colonial regime.” (Fitzpatrick, 2008, p: 280)
Beginning in Nigeria in 1935 the British government, inspired by the Dutch, opened literature bureaus in the African and Asian colonies they controlled. (Fitzpatrick, 2008, p:283)

The texts chosen for these libraries primarily included materials that “dealt either with the exalted nature of the colonial power’s culture, the glory of it’s metropolis, or the primitiveness of the ‘backward’ people of Africa.” (Odi, 1991,p:598)

While African libraries did not begin with colonialism and collections of ancient written texts are being recovered across the continent (Mutonga and Okune, 2022, p:191), in precolonial Africa the collection, storage and dissemination of information was often an oral practice. The libraries opened by British colonial powers with their concentration on written materials were “foreign orientated institution[s] that in no way reflected African tradition” (Odi, 1991, p:597)
The McMillian Library in Nairobi opened in 1931 and exclusively served European settlers until 1962 when Kenya declared independence. The modern McMillian Library aims not only to decolonise, but to meet the needs of the local community. As such, the new collections policy prioritises local authors and languages catalogued via a unique system (Mutonga and Okune, 2022). The McMillian library leadership face the challenge of balancing an inherited collection of colonial materials, representing precolonial traditions and honouring the freedom fighters that secured independence: The “digitised archive of colonial newspapers, gazettes and photographs... looks to call attention to the missing perspectives...to think about what ‘ought’ to be there.” (p: 201)
Part 2: Colonial Heirlooms in Libraries

The ways we store and define knowledge – where we place value and to whom we give authority, the languages that are chosen for publication, the formats we deem worthy of holding in our collections, how we catalogue our resources - can be seen as "colonial heirlooms"
(Towlson, 2021, p:2).

Instead of respecting that different knowledge systems may judge quality using different factors, we tend to rely on "traditional" markers of quality like peer review or citation formats to decide on the academic rigour of research:

"Confronted with academic journals from countries of the [G]lobal South that they are not familiar with, librarians... often assume that if these quality markers are absent or not recognisable, then the journals are of lesser or even questionable quality. This assumption is wrong, but it continues today."
(Chan, quoted in Mbao Nkoudou, 2020, p:30)
Only 5% of the world is made up of native English speakers (Drubin and Kellog, 2012), but the English language retains dominance in academic publishing.

A 2012 study estimated that 80% of the journals indexed in Scopus are published in English (van Weijen, 2012). Furthermore, if we look at the Scimago Journal and Country Rank (where journals are ranked by number of citations), we see that the top 50 places are dominated by journals published in the UK or USA (Scimago, 2022).

Non-native speakers of English submitting articles often find that their work is critiqued on its use of the English language rather than the merits of their research (Drubin and Kellog, 2012), while those who do not speak English find their access to information greatly curtailed (Marquez and Porras, 2020). Thus, even in the “post colonial” era, we continue to see local languages replaced.
Researchers seek publication in these journals because the impact factor is higher (Marquez and Porras, 2020). This can lead to them studying topics that are of international interest rather than that which could benefit local populations (Okune, 2019). Mboa Nkoudou calls this "Epistemic Alienation." (2020, p: 32).

Another facet of epistemic alienation is reliance on research produced externally (Mboa 2020). Despite being 12.5% of the global population, African countries produce under 1% of research (Etoka-Beka and Samba-Louaka, 2022). Instead, knowledge comes from outside: papers about Africa without researchers from Africa (Molteno, 2016, The Right to Research Coalition, 2017).

Even efforts to increase co-authorship across regions can result in outsiders driving the research: Okune (2019) notes that of 24 co-authored papers presenting research from the Global South, only 4 had lead authors from those regions.
Open Access, often suggested as a solution to the barriers faced by researchers from the Global South, can pose new challenges: authors from low or middle income countries often lack the funding to publish with OA journals (Albornoz, Okune and Chan, 2020) and although some nations like Kenya or South Africa have a network of institutional repositories “there are around 20 African countries with no known digital repositories” (Kitchen, 2020).

Mboa states that Open Access is a western agenda – it’s not being pushed by the leaders of many African nations (The Right to Research Coalition, 2017). A lot of local research is held in physical rather than digital formats so these voices are excluded from international academic conversations. This also impacts on local discovery (Molteno, 2016), adding to the sense of epistemic alienation.

In this expectation for research to be available digitally in order to be considered important, there are echoes of the earlier dismissal of oral traditions in favour of print: If knowledge is not stored in the format used by the west, the contribution is silenced.
“I did not look at the... cataloguing system as actually an expression of values. I just sort of saw it as this disassociated, neutral, organising principal.”

- (Dartmouth Library, 2021: 9:54)

Librarians, libraries and information management cannot be considered “neutral” – historical bias is embedded within the systems we use and to ignore this is to uphold, consciously or unconsciously, the de facto white supremacy of a society built from colonial legacy.

(Chiu, Ettarh and Ferretti, 2021, p:57)
Melvil Dewey was a white, English speaking, Christian man born in the US in 1851 and his cataloging of religion illustrates this worldview clearly (Evans, 2022): Christianity is shelved at 220-289, while 290-299 is for texts about "other Religions" (OCLC, 2005) - Christianity is the norm.

Adherents of Buddhism and Hinduism make up approximately 22% of the global population (Pew Research Centre, 2012a, 2012b), but texts on these traditions share a single digit alongside Jainism (OCLC, 2005). 23% of the population are Muslim (Pew Research Centre, 2009), but texts about Islam, Bahá’í and Babism can all be found at 297 (OCLC, 2005). In a UK public library catalogue, the single digit of 299 covers traditions as diverse as Shintoism, Indigenous American Beliefs and Wicca. (LibrariesWest, 2021).

DDC is currently in use in 135 countries (wikipedia, 2022).
The issue of colonial legacy exists within Library of Congress Classification too. Subject headings often don’t reflect current knowledge or language use.

Anyone can submit a “suggestion for improvement” and the Library of Congress reviews these proposals to decide if the changes should be adopted. “A majority of the proposals submitted each year are accepted.”

(Library of Congress, no date)

It was first officially noted in 1971 that the subject heading ‘God’ in LCC meant specifically the Christian God – again, Christianity was the norm and the rest of the world was an exception. This subject heading wasn’t updated until 2006.

(Hoffman, 2015, p:65)
In 2014 students and librarians of Dartmouth University suggested that the subject heading ‘illegal aliens’ should be replaced with ‘undocumented immigrants’. Initially refused, further campaigning led to it’s acceptance in 2016 (Dartmouth Library, 2021). Then in “a level of immediate political backlash never before seen with any other LCSH decision” (Lo, 2019, P:170) Congress itself intervened, with representatives even suggesting legislation that would force retention of the subject heading.

In late 2021, the subject heading was changed to ‘illegal immigration’. Jensen (2021) noted that the new subject heading: “is not only dehumanizing, it’s inaccurate and it’s racially charged. By retaining the word ‘illegal,’ the cataloguing hierarchy continues damage and showcases its inability to be as progressive and inclusive... as it should be.”
Ettarh (2018) defines vocational awe as the belief that libraries are inherently good, even sacred. Consider the image of libraries as ‘temples of knowledge,’ which casts library workers as providers of an almost holy service. This idealistic view can mask the historical and contemporary flaws within our profession, placing our institutions as beyond critique. It sets up systemic failures as the faults of individual workers (Chiu, Ettarh and Ferretti, 2021).

This tweet from CILIP (2016) demonstrates the vocational awe embedded in our professional culture. What does it mean to be the line between “civilisation and barbarism?”
Vocational awe can also be linked to the propensity for low paid, very part time or even unpaid entry level roles within library services: workers are expected to sacrifice financial recompense in the name of ‘serving’ communities, creating a financial barrier to those entering the profession (Ettarh, 2018).

Inskip (2022) identifies discrimination, microaggressions and financial inequalities as elements that contribute to the whiteness of our sector. Research shows that 96.7% of library workers identify as white - 10% higher than across the UK labour force in general (Hall et al, 2015) and that White British people hold more wealth than members of other ethnic groups in the UK (Khan, 2020).
You can view an e-copy, download a foldable version for print distribution or access the full reference list at:

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