

THE AFRICA BIBLIOGRAPHIC CENTRE IN DAR ES SALAAM;
ITS ORIGINS AND IMMEDIATE PLANS

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The Africa Bibliographic Centre Secretariat, or ABCS, is based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. (It has no connection with the African Bibliographic Centre in Washington D.C., which is run by Daniel Matthews primarily as an information centre for American users.) The function of the ABCS is, for the time being, limited to propagandising the "ABC concept" through the medium of the ABC Newsletter, which is currently distributed gratis to a wide range of institutions and individuals within Africa and to a much smaller number outside. Although some previous news items in the professional literature have discussed the ABC's function and role, the following statement may be taken as reflecting the current situation.

ORIGIN OF THE "ABC CONCEPT"

The ABCS is the result of one of the most recent of a series of proposals for linking together documentation and bibliographic activities on the continent of Africa in a cooperative supranational organization. Pan-African bibliographic control is, of course, not a new idea. In 1964 Mrs. Margaret Amosu, then Librarian of the University of Ibadan's Institute of African Studies, was instrumental in persuading the Conference of Tropical African Studies to recommend the setting-up of a documentation centre for tropical Africa. In 1967 the Nairobi Conference on African Bibliography passed three resolutions (nos.17-19) concerned with the international coordination of bibliographic data on Africa. Resolution 17 recommended the establishment of a network for coordination, and of a "documentation centre provided with key-punching and computer equipment" to link national and regional centres in Africa and centres in other countries. Resolution 18 recommended that the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences should be distributed to centres in each African country in return for regular lists of relevant publications in that country to be included in subsequent issues. Resolution 19 was concerned with coordinating information on research in progress to supplement the work of CIDESA in Brussels.¹ In 1971 K. K. Roy made similar recommendations in a paper presented to the ISLIC International Conference on Information Science in Tel Aviv. He advocated the establishment of a continental documentation centre in both Africa and Asia which would publish a monthly "monolithic encyclopedia" to give access to the mass of material published in African and Asian periodicals and newspapers.²

In 1973, at the 3rd session of the International Congress of Africanists held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, three librarians - Robert T. Jordan, Kebreab Wolde Giorgis and Talaat A. Wadood - presented a paper on their concept of the shape of a future "African Bibliographic Centre".³ The Congress passed a resolution endorsing the concept and recommending that "a centre for African information-documentation-bibliography be established". The present ABC secretariat, based in Dar es Salaam and publishing the bi-monthly ABC Newsletter, is the initial outcome.

¹ International Conference on African Bibliography, Nairobi, 1967. The Bibliography of Africa. (London, 1970), p.28.

² ISLIC International Conference on Information Science, Tel-Aviv, 1971. Proceedings. (Tel Aviv, 1972), pp.67-75.

³ R. T. Jordan, Kebreab W. Giorgis, Talaat A. Wadood, African Bibliographic Centre (ABC) (Dar es Salaam, repr. 1977). ABC Position Paper no.1.

In October 1976, at the second meeting of the Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians in Lusaka, Zambia, Mrs. Ophelia Mascarenhas presented a paper on recent developments in the ABC.¹ The conference passed the following resolutions:

- "9. An international network for the co-ordination of bibliographic data on Africa be established; that a documentation centre provided with key-punching and computer equipment be set up as soon as possible at a suitable location in Africa.
10. Noting that a medium for communication of developments in national and international information systems, networks and documentation and bibliography already exists inside Africa in the form of the ABC Newsletter, that members make use of the Newsletter whenever possible to report such developments."

Presentations on or discussions about the ABC concept have also taken place informally at such gatherings as the IFLA Annual Conference, the ALA Midwinter Conference and various workshops on computer applications in libraries.

The concept of the African Bibliographic Centre was worked out in some detail by the original authors. They identified some twelve components which, ideally, would constitute an ABC in the best of all possible worlds. Some of these are outlined in the following paragraphs. Some, perhaps all, of these components will probably not be realisable for a number of years. But information workers in Africa must start planning now for the increasingly rapid changes that will come and, indeed, are already upon us.

THE ABC NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter started in April 1974 as a "forum for exchange of views and news on the development of an Africa Bibliographic Centre". Six of the first seven issues appeared from Addis Ababa; the exception was a special issue produced at the IFLA Conference in Washington, D.C. in November 1974. In April 1976 the Newsletter began to appear from Dar es Salaam, where it is currently issued.

The editorial board of the Newsletter hopes that it can fulfil a dual function as a forum for discussion of the ABC concept and, in addition, as an effective medium for communicating news of developments, conferences, projects, and surveys in ABC-related areas. The Newsletter is distributed free to some 129 individuals and institutions in 34 African countries (out of a total of 48 OAU member states); it goes to an additional 21 recipients in North America, Europe and Asia. It appears monthly or bi-monthly.

The Newsletter's effectiveness will be maximised only when it becomes a communication medium of first resort for information workers in Africa. At the moment, there is a danger that the contents of the Newsletter will focus on East Africa and Ethiopia, say, to the exclusion of West, North, Central and Southern Africa.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC PUBLISHING

The original ABC proposal visualised three constituent parts under this rubric: African Books in Print (including non-print media); an African periodicals index; and a Pan-African bibliography along the lines of NUC or BNB. The first of these elements has now begun to appear commercially in England, where the African Book Publishing Record is produced by Hans Zell.

The second, an African periodicals index, is likely to be the first major component to be produced by the ABCS from its own resources. Work is presently under way to produce a pilot issue of ABC Africa Index, which will cover scholarly journals published in 1976 within the continent of Africa. Unfortunately, but inevitably given the present geographical location of the ABCS,

¹ Colin Darch, O. C. Mascarenhas, The Africa Bibliographic Centre (ABC): towards a continental bibliographic and documentation system for Africa in the 21st century. (Dar es Salaam, repr. 1977). ABC Position Paper no.5.

the listings of journals from eastern and central Africa will be much more comprehensive than of those from West Africa. For the same reasons, French and Portuguese material will be only sparsely covered.

The pilot issue will hopefully be ready for distribution by September this year; the appearance and cost of future issues will depend on the degree of enthusiasm and support elicited by the first number.

There is no intention on the part of the ABCS to enter the field of subject or country bibliographical publishing, which is adequately provided for by existing channels both inside Africa and elsewhere.

AFRICAN ABSTRACTS

An abstracting service for locally-produced scholarly journals could relatively easily be based on the periodicals index outlined above. The quantity of material might warrant division of the service into a series of subject bulletins (cf. Bulletin signalétique or the Soviet Referativny zhurnal).

However, there is presently little evidence to indicate that social scientists in area studies make much use of abstracting services, unlike their colleagues in the natural sciences. Participants in the recent SCOLMA conference "Progress in African Bibliography" will remember that doubts were expressed about the wisdom of trying to revive the former London-based African Abstracts, since there may well be insufficient demand to support the service. ABCS therefore reserves its judgement on this component of the original "ABC concept".

THE USE OF ULTRAFICHE

Ultrafiche was originally developed in order to make 'instant libraries' commercially available to new institutions. One 'fiche' can contain as many as three thousand pages, but is as easily legible as an ordinary microfich containing only 100 pages. The cost per bibliographic unit is a fraction of the cost of books in hard binding. Even so, the available collections are costly and contain only a small proportion of materials relevant to Africa. No single African library can afford to buy all these collections, but a central institution housing a "collection of collections" could make them available when needed, and eventually begin to produce selected African materials in ultrafiche itself.

The centre would specialise in acquiring copies of such materials as government and legal publications, mimeographed papers, documents, theses and research reports, patents, standards, conference proceedings, and privately printed ephemera. Such fugitive material is often essential for research, yet is difficult to locate and obtain except at prohibitive expense in terms of time and travel. The number of copies may be limited, or it may be impossible to obtain more than one copy. But if a recognised centre run cooperatively by member countries were to acquire such material and make it available, when cleared for distribution, on microfich, then the problem would become much less serious. Sets of 'fiche' could be sold by language, depth of coverage, or other criteria. Selected libraries in each African country would receive sets on deposit. The cost of mass-produced portable 'fiche' readers is diminishing, and book-size readers costing only a few pounds may soon be a reality. Such commercial organisations as University Microfilm (with the Durham-based Middle East Datafile) or the African Imprint Services (New York) are already either operating or planning such systems, using microfiche techniques. ABCS would, however, attempt to focus on the needs of African information systems within the continent.

COMPUTER DATA BASES

Online access to large stores of data from remote terminals is now commonplace in developed countries, particularly in the areas of science, technology, medicine and the social sciences. ABC might initially offer hardcopy output from external data bases.

The functions of a data base with a uniform machine-readable bibliographic format might include:-

- A. Storage and exchange of cataloguing information.
- B. Centralised production/distribution of cards.
- C. Serials control.
- D. Communication of photocopy requests.
- E. Remote catalogue access.
- F. Help in the production of national bibliographies and library catalogues.

The new PANAFTEL telecommunications network using satellites is unlikely to be available for such purposes for some years, so cheap computer link-ups across Africa are still a long way in the future. For this reason, the original ABC proposal emphasized the use of a very few large-capacity computers which are not replaceable by labour-intensive manual systems. The reasoning has, however, been sharply criticized.

OTHER COMPONENTS

The other, long-term components of the ABC concept have been outlined in detail in other papers published by the ABC, and which are available to interested workers in the field.¹ They include such elements as current awareness services (SDI), distribution of free ephemera, a review journal, and an agency of bibliographic consultants.

The elements of the ABC are mutually self-supporting and, if operated in a single institution within the African continent, would probably constitute an economically viable bibliographic-documentation complex. The components listed above do not generally duplicate work already being done in areas such as production of major subject or national bibliographies, cataloguing and classification, or technological innovation.

PRESENT STATUS OF THE ABC

Since the introduction of the detailed proposals outlined above by Jordan (then working as Associate Librarian at the University of Addis Ababa), Kebeab (now Executive Secretary of the Eritrean Chamber of Commerce), and Wadood (an Egyptian, and Librarian of the OAU), three more people have become actively involved in the development of the ABC. They are E. E. Kaungammo, director of the Tanzania Library Service, Mrs. O. C. Mascarenhas, Senior Librarian at the University of Dar es Salaam and Colin Darch, also of the University of Dar es Salaam Library.

There has been a sustained attempt to sound out opinions about the ABC among librarians in Africa and in LDCs in other continents. Many of the criticisms that have been received have been reported in summary in past issues of the ABC Newsletter, and the general tone of the response could perhaps be summarised by Gramsci's slogan "Pessimism of the intelligence; optimism of the will". There is general recognition of the need for an ABC, but the problems - economic, technical, and political - involved in implementation are daunting. Presently, therefore, the ABC is attempting to disseminate the idea as widely as possible and to initiate a debate from which we hope a consensus will emerge about what is both possible and desirable. Perhaps the ABC will assume an umbrella role, coordinating and pulling together individual efforts by institutions and workers in different African countries. Perhaps a pilot project, on a regional basis, can be started with one or two of the components in order to test their viability in the field. The precise direction that the ABC will take in the future depends on many factors. We hope that it will be possible, nonetheless, for Africa to develop not simply forty or fifty national information systems, but also a continental information system, as a step towards African unity.

¹ Third World correspondents should write directly to African Bibliographic Centre (Secretariat) P.O. Box 35132, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Others may obtain information from ABC, 2687 Centennial Court, Alexandria, VA 22311, United States of America.