Frog Voices, Whispers, and Silences: Problems and Issues in Collecting for an African Studies Library in Africa

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SUMMARY. This article is an attempt to respond to two questions about discrete special African studies collections in African university libraries. First, do we need to have such collections at all? Second, if we do, how can we write collection development policies that make sense, given the present turmoil in African studies and indeed in the social sciences in general? Librarians have a responsibility to recognise that their practice cannot be value-free, and that their collections are biased by the choices made by writers, by publishers, and by themselves. Their duty, especially in Africa, may simply be to ensure that African voices are not drowned out in their collections. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service; 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Why put African materials in special collections? If there is an answer to this question other than the purely pragmatic, we must disentangle two problems—how the various ‘area studies’ constitute themselves as an array of academic disciplines, and the subordinate question of what kind of special library support, if any, such disciplines may require.

Let us take the second question first. At a superficial glance, special library collections devoted to Africa make some kind of organisational sense, at least in academic institutions in Europe and the Americas. This may be partly, but not exclusively, because it is relatively easy for librarians to identify materials about Africa and to place them in a dedicated collection. But is there anything about African studies, or about its literature, that requires exceptional, separate, or discrete library treatment, as opposed to the usual specialist bibliographic and reference knowledge? Are African studies like law, or music, or fine arts—disciplines typically supported by a literature that is so physically or bibliographically ‘different’ that practice requires separation? The quick answer is no, but if ‘African studies’ are in the curriculum in some shape or form, or are a research focus, then it may be a reasonable choice to concentrate library expertise, as well as the material in many instances, to serve the needs and for the organisational convenience of specialist students and researchers.

There is still a difficulty, and it arises from the question about how area studies are constituted. In the United States, at least, there seem to be elevated reasons for studying Africa:

[knowledge of the other; knowledge of the self: the journey to Africa supports both projects. But most urgently it pushes students to consider the relationship between the two: between self and other, West and non-West, “developed” and “underdeveloped.”] African studies is a way of studying Africans; but it is also, even more significantly, a way of studying the processes of globalisation.

This may be a fair—or at least clear–enough post-colonial argument for African studies, at least for North Americans. But why do African academic institutions need to have special academic centres and special collections devoted to Africa in the libraries? For us in Africa, this particular distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’ clouds the issue, and we are firmly and unhappily on the receiving end of the processes of
globalisation. In fact, we may even ask what we mean by ‘African studies’ in Africa, when presumably African universities teach the social sciences by building on local knowledge, by using local and national experience, and by recognising that African experience is a point of departure rather than a point of reference. What do we mean by an African studies collection in the library when presumably the collection development policy of the whole university library service is also committed to using national experience as a point of departure for the local production of knowledge? Why, if the whole collection is infused, as it should be, with accounts of different aspects of our own African reality, is there usually some physically closed off section of the library building devoted especially to a record of African experience, written as it happens mainly by outsiders?

These are, of course, ironical questions as well as big ones. University teaching and university libraries in Africa do not often take local and national experience as a starting point; collections consist overwhelmingly of books and periodicals brought from Europe and North America; we in Africa all too often reflect other people’s views of ourselves.4 Further questions about special African collections in African university libraries arise: do we need to have such collections at all? Can we write collection development policies that make sense, given the present turmoil in African studies and indeed in the social sciences in general?

Some hidden assumptions lurk behind library practice in Africa with regard to material on Africa.5 There is a largely uncritical attitude towards post-colonial insights into the character of the corpus of academic analysis on Africa–especially the idea of Northernness as ‘self’ and Africanness as ‘other.’ This may be a reflex of the nearly universal use of European languages in the African academy, as well as of the troubled history and present characteristics of African area studies as a discipline. Equally important is a grave crisis of sustainability of libraries on the continent, as African librarians attempt to reproduce a model developed in hugely different–and richer–social, economic, and political conditions.6 It is far from obvious, even if we accept the need for special library collections on Africa in Africa, that they should simply and inadequately reflect, in conditions of immense poverty and indebtedness, the characteristics of what are indubitably the great North American and European specialist libraries.
WHAT ARE AFRICAN STUDIES?7

For librarians, as for other academics, ‘African studies’ do not constitute an easily demarcated discipline, despite what appears to be the term’s obvious commonsensical signification. The idea of ‘Africa’ as an object of study is fraught with difficulty, as many modern scholars have forcefully pointed out: ‘Africa is not a given, we make it as we make our own history.’8 Not only is it not given, its meaning has changed and continues to change over time, and it is arguably more contested academically and politically in our present epoch than it has ever been before. William Martin has written of ‘uncertainty and challenges from multiple perspectives’ with regard to African studies and of ‘growing chaos within the social sciences’ in general.9 Librarians in the field are aware of all this, of course, but perhaps do not always see these struggles as having a lot to do directly with their own practice. However, as soon as we attempt to write a coherent collection development policy, it is obvious that these problems are more than administrative issues. Should an Africa-focused collection in Africa include diaspora studies, or collect works on the black experience in the United States, the Caribbean and Brazil?

For librarians, insights from one kind of area studies do not necessarily transfer easily to other areas. Expressions such as ‘European,’ ‘African,’ ‘South Asian’ or ‘American’ do not signify in equivalent ways. ‘European studies’ is not the logical or epistemological equivalent of ‘African studies,’ and cannot be so. In Africa the terms ‘European’ and ‘African’ are commonly used as racial definitions, code words for white or black, as when Afrikaans-speakers are termed ‘white Africans.’ But most collections would stop short of basing policy on such racial distinctions, for compelling reasons.

Considering this, why do we divide the world up into continents in order to study it? Inglehart and Carballo have pointed out that ‘[area] studies centers [. . .] are based on the assumption that Latin America (like Africa, the Middle East, etc.) are more than arbitrary geographical expressions: they define coherent cultural regions, having people with distinctive values and worldviews that make them think differently and behave differently from people of other cultures.’10 But if this is so, why should Portuguese-speaking Brazil fall under ‘Latin American studies’ alongside Spanish-speaking Chile, for example, but not alongside Lusophone and African Angola, its ‘eastern frontier’ to which it is linked by culture, history, and oceanic trade? The answer of course is that most existing regional definitions are ‘the product of processes of
Western imperial “discovery” and conquest. The nature of the terminology frequently gives the game away—the ‘Middle’ or the ‘Far’ East are only that way if you are in some sense standing in Europe (the ‘West’). These definitions often lead to reductionist usage and reinforce undifferentiated characterisations—of Africa as the dark and savage place of nineteenth century geographical literature and CNN news reports.

There are alternative ways to establish ‘areas’ that may give nightmares to cataloguers but that also promise rich insight. Landmasses are not the only game in town. We already know about the Pacific Rim, and Paul Gilroy has constituted the Black Atlantic; but these are still based on some idea of physical proximity. There are many other kinds of culturally definable areas possible.

The fuzziness of ostensibly uncomplicated geographical categories emerges if we examine an apparently straightforward expression such as ‘southern Africa.’ Where and what is southern Africa? During the years of apartheid, South African writers commonly used the term quite narrowly to mean South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, and Lesotho, plus the so-called TBVC states (Transkei, Bophutatswana, Venda, and Ciskei, the nominally ‘independent’ bantustans). Thus, South African usage assigned content to the expression in order to legitimate the politically illegitimate.

In neighbouring countries, by contrast, the term referred, in effect, to the member states of SADCC (the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference, now a community). But that definition includes Tanzania, a country normally considered geographically part of the eastern African region, even if it has politically become southern African. Going further, if we take the degree of integration of different states into the South African-dominated regional economy into account, then Angola, for example, with historically weak links to the system, is only marginally ‘southern African.’ At an even more detailed level, some parts of some countries are more ‘southern African’ than others. Mozambique south of the Sabie River, for instance, constitutes an important and integral part of the South African migrant labour network. The central and northern Mozambican regions are largely outside it.

‘Intellectuals,’ as Seekings argues—and I believe this includes librarians—‘have for too long accepted the logic of comparison within areas whose boundaries generally originated in the former imperial powers of the west [. . .] and subsequent geopolitical rather than intellectual factors.’
The difficulties are not only geographical. Do African studies include the study of African law, of African medicine, of African engineering? Which social sciences fall within the framework, which ones are excluded? For some scholars, area studies are a branch of comparative politics, admittedly of a strongly cross-disciplinary character; for others, and more polemically, the term has the purpose of locating Africa as the object of study by establishing its otherness.

To take an instrumentalised view, libraries can only collect actually existing and recorded texts, publications, regardless of how we understand those words. At first glance, a ‘discipline’ such as ‘African studies,’ founded primarily but not exclusively on a geographical definition, should have clearer boundaries and be less complicated to maintain than a conventionally constituted one such as economics or chemistry. It should be easier to decide whether a book is about Gabon or Senegal or not, for example, than whether it is about sociology, physics, or history. Unfortunately, things are not so simple. The time is long past when we could collect comprehensively in any entire discipline, and to that extent, our collections will constitute an interpretation of the state of the disciplines that they focus on. The judgements that we–academics and librarians–make about what to include and what to leave out will amplify some voices, silence some, and reduce others to a whisper, locally but effectively. In and of itself, the collection will present a certain view of the world.

A Place, a People, an Experience?

But still, librarians worry about what we are supposed to be collecting. Works about a continent, works about a (racially-defined) people who live on that continent, works about the experience of these people dispersed around the world by the experience of slavery? The emergence of the Afrocentric paradigm from the 1960s onwards has sharpened librarians’ awareness of this issue, but has left them with a new set of difficulties. Some proponents of Afrocentrism argue that ‘it is valid to posit Africa as a geographical and cultural starting base in the study of peoples of African descent.’15 In such a formulation, it is the experience of African people, wherever they are, that is the object of study, and African studies collections may thus expand to enfold and include African-American studies and such topics as the black experience in Brazil, Cuba, the Caribbean, and throughout the entire diaspora. The geographical focus on which African studies might have lazily rested shifts and
opens out as its tidy borders blur and merge into a broader and more inclusive kind of social science.

The shift from a purely geographical foundation to one that takes account of people and experience does not solve the librarians’ problems, however. Who are these African people and how are they defined—by skin colour, by race, by cultural practices? In the reductionist and populist account, Afrocentrism starts and finishes as a question of skin colour, and has as much to do with the politics of race in the United States as with the production of knowledge in Africa itself. Thus, the Senegalese historian and philosopher Cheikh Anta Diop, now acknowledged as a ‘father of Afrocentrism,’ is commonly represented as wanting to show that the Egyptian pharaohs were black, by looking for melanin in their mummified remains. The deeper significance of Diop’s work, however, lies in a much broader question, namely ‘whether history before the arrival of the White Man could be understood as a social history, or whether the limits of our understanding were the limits of archaeology, however reconstructed.’ In such an account, Afrocentrism becomes an historical concept as well as a philosophical one, but in both cases, the meaning is the same—Africa stands at the centre of everything.

Why is this important for librarians in Africa? Because the very idea of ‘African studies’ emerged within a hegemonic and Eurocentric intellectual tradition, and was essentially concerned from its beginning with the study of the ‘other,’ whatever the specific or local objective impetus might have been. Thus, the funding of African studies in the United States after the Second World War took place as part of a strategic engagement with the world made necessary by Washington’s desire for hegemony. But we need only contrast the subjective construction of African studies (and other post-colonial area studies) with the process of construction of European studies, or American studies in Britain, to see that it was always invested with ambiguity, and has always been contested.

The literature and thus our collections reflect this, in Africa as elsewhere. The earliest Europeans who wrote on Africa did not work within an academic tradition. Rather, as missionaries, scholars and explorers, they thought and wrote within what amounted to a system of private enterprise, needing to sell their knowledge in the marketplace. Meanwhile, the earliest African authors either assimilated to a European literary tradition and wrote in English, French, or Portuguese, or else produced ethnohistorical works in their own tongues for a tiny reader-
ship of missionaries and educated compatriots. This was a parallel but largely devalued tradition.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries this freelance mode of intellectual production had begun to be gradually supplanted by research ‘controlled directly by colonial governments,’ as even conservative commentators have admitted. Much research in colonial times was tainted since ‘numerous investigations [were] intended to aid policy makers’ and direct subsidies from government funds paid for them. New sub-disciplines emerged to play new roles and interpret new data. From the 1930s, ‘governments drew increasingly on the assistance of professional anthropologists and sociologists, as well as archaeologists and others to supplement the information previously amassed [ . . . ]’

Many scholars were actually eager to build relationships with the structures of colonial power. British anthropologists, for example, ‘tried intermittently to persuade the government that [they] could indeed help in the affairs of colonial rule. By the mid-1920s the nature of the interface between scholarly and administrative interests in Africa had become clearer.’ Indeed, by the 1930s, it was explicit: it is sometimes argued that ‘African studies’ in the English-speaking world were kick-started in the United Kingdom by Lord Hailey’s African Survey, first published in 1938 and intended as a handbook for serving British colonial administrators. The institutional base emerged much later and in different circumstances in the post-war United States, when Melville Herskovits founded the first university programme in African Studies at Northwestern University in 1951.

Mamdani has described the close relationship between the colonial enterprise and the academy in the following way: ‘The colonial construction of knowledge about Africa was based on three key disciplines. The first was archaeology, with its construction based on unearthed artefacts. The second was anthropology, with its focus on an essentialised African, the Muntu. And the third was history, which was literally synonymous with the history of the white man on the continent.’

The colonial authorities encouraged local knowledge production by settlers. In Mozambique, for example, there was the Sociedade de Estudos de Moçambique with its own journal, ceasing publication only at independence in 1975; in Northern Rhodesia there was the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute with its strong publishing tradition in anthropology. African studies at the University of Cape Town go back to 1918, when the School of African Life and Languages was set up.

How can we describe library collections founded during this period, constituted for these purposes, and consisting of this kind of literature,
as anything other than colonial libraries, unless our practice is con-
sciously intended to transform them by empowering, in creative new
ways, other voices to speak on the colonial and post-colonial experience
in Africa? This question is not rhetorical, and applies as much, if not
more so, to the great collections in South Africa as it does to the libraries
of other parts of the continent. At the heart of these difficulties over the
older colonial ‘African studies’ collections, we find the problem of an-
thropology, the discipline and practice that produced much of the early
Northern academic writing on Africa. In turn, at the heart of the diffi-
culty over anthropology lies the illusory, persistent, and evolutionist
concept of the ‘primitive society,’ developed in Victorian times by such
classicists as Henry Maine, John M. McLennan, and Lewis Henry Mor-
gan.²⁹ As the colonial enterprise ended in Africa, anthropology as a dis-
cipline started to practice a little introspection, and has found itself in
ideological and methodological trouble ever since.³⁰ By the early 1970s,
a younger generation of anthropologists were beginning to deconstruct
their own practice in such texts as the collections edited by Dell Hymes
and Talal Asad, and the discipline has never fully recovered from the
critiques that were mounted.³¹ This is not the place to summarise these
extensive and prolonged debates, but it is probably worth picking up a
few of the points made as they bear on library practice, especially with
regard to collection development in ‘African studies’ libraries located
on our continent.

Anthropology is seen uncompromisingly by many as ‘the child of
imperialism,’ to use Kathleen Gough’s compelling phrase.³² It repre-
sents the view of the coloniser, looking at subject peoples whose voices
cannot be directly heard. An African scholar who feels hostile towards
the discipline, writes Archie Mafeje, ‘does not have to be a trained an-
thropologist. Familiarity with classical anthropology texts is sufficient.’³³
It is not very hard to see why this might be so. The anthropologist, wrote
E. E. Evans-Pritchard as late as 1951, ‘studies primitive societies di-
rectly.’³⁴ Only a couple of years later, S. F. Nadel stated that anthropol-
gists ‘attempt to extend our knowledge of man [sic] and society to
“primitive” communities, “simpler peoples,” or “preliterate societies.”’³⁵
Amadiume calls African responses to such anthropological writing
‘nzagwalo’ literature,’ explaining the expression as an Igbo response to
insults suffered.³⁶ She puts her finger firmly on the crucial point regard-
ing the material when she points out that ‘in [being ashamed of associating
with anthropology, Africans] face a dilemma, because, unfortunately, a
lot of the archival information that Africans need in order to move for-
ward is trapped in this subject.’³⁶ Not only Africans: there have been at-
tempts by modern Northern anthropologists to rework the field notes of earlier predecessors.37

**FROG VOICES, WHISPERS, AND SILENCES**

According to the anthropologist William Willis, the African-American novelist Richard Wright used the term ‘frog perspectives’ to describe the way in which ‘facts’ are often seen by the oppressed from a special point of view, which differs sharply from the perspective of the oppressor.38 Liking the expression, I searched for the text in the library of the University of Cape Town, but found only five works by Wright in the collection, none of them the one I needed. Wright had himself become a frog voice.

Implicit in the way a traditional academic library represents its collections is the idea that a multiplicity of voices are heard, and that the collection is thus in some sense representative of what is reasonably believed and known. The problem with African studies collections in Africa is that the voices heard are overwhelmingly the voices of the colonisers, and the frog voices are silent. Emphatically, it is not the role of librarians to create new silences, but they can and have on occasion, working with academics, reintroduced silenced frog perspectives to the record. Bontinck’s series on African travellers in equatorial Africa in *Zaire-Afrique* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, or Gerhard Liesegang’s recovery of early black Mozambican authors in the pages of *Arquivo* in Maputo are examples of what might be more commonly attempted.39

But the whispers and silences in library collections will remain, as long as the production of knowledge about Africa remains marginal to the academic enterprise in Africa itself, and is subordinate to a racial hierarchy elsewhere. Students often see this clearly. In the United States they are commonly dissatisfied with the way institutions treat African and diaspora studies, seeing low funding levels and under-representation in the curriculum as an expression of racism. In May 1999, for example, students took to the streets of Washington, DC to protest what they said was a clear and deliberate pattern of under-funding and under-resourcing of the African Studies programme, one of eleven area studies programmes at Georgetown University.40 There have been dozens of such student protests, focussing on curriculum issues or targeting specific teachers.

Such a situation is related to the particular conditions that have prevailed and that continue to prevail ‘favour[ing] the production of white
intellectuals (including radical white intellectuals) and block[ing] the production of black intellectuals—or indeed of female intellectuals.41 A stroll around the grounds of any elite South African universities may confirm this truth, and library shelves will reflect it, too. The production of knowledge and its concrete manifestation, the writing of texts, has historically been the task of predominantly male elites, supported, of course, by the labour of the mass of the excluded. Worldwide, over the last few centuries, a European and white male stratum has dominated the production of what is now a dominant global mode of knowledge, both in form and in content. But the dominant mode of knowledge has also historically presented itself as both value-free and as universal. Both of these positivist claims have come to be widely rejected. The idea that library practice is in some sense neutral or value-free persists, however, and I shall return to this later on.

The gendered, class-based and racial organisation of human societies underlies the production of a Eurocentric and dominant mode of knowledge, but once we can see this reality for what it is, it becomes entirely logical to ask, in Mudimbe’s words, ‘To what extent can one speak of an African knowledge, and in what sense?’42 The process of discovering or producing such an African knowledge does not necessarily invalidate the whole body of existing (dominant) knowledge, although it does necessarily reject its positivist and universalist claims.

Is collection development constrained by the nature of the existing literature, and if it is, should it be so? Should builders of library classification schemes make provision only for subjects that writers actually write about? This debate about ‘literary warrant’ dates back at least to 1911.43 Do librarians in South Africa carry some of the responsibility for the ‘reproduction of inequalities in intellectual work’ because we, like other academics, have not self-consciously attempted to offset the structural effects of how universities are organised and how knowledge is socially produced?44 The late Harold Wolpe was referring specifically to the effects of apartheid when he made this point, but it does have a more general application. A library collection is defined as much by what its builders leave out as by what they include.

What Kirk-Greene called ‘the routine infrastructure of Africana books and publishing’ thirty years ago has supported African studies for several decades.45 There are different opinions about how solid that infrastructure actually is. On the one hand, at the continental, regional, and national levels, such reference works as encyclopaedias, the various types of bibliography, dictionaries, atlases, yearbooks, and of course, journals of varying degrees of specialisation, continue to appear. Thus,
the infrastructure stays in place, although smaller in scale than it should be and less regular in its updating schedule than is desirable. On the other hand, as William Martin has written of his experience at the University of Illinois: ‘To send a student to the library serves only to confirm [that the knowledge-base on Africa is shaky]. Even in [ . . . ] the third largest university library in the country—we receive only a handful of daily newspapers from the whole of Africa, whereas we receive at least this many from each major European country. Africana and African studies share one room in the library, in sharp contrast to large, lending, departmental libraries for other disciplines and areas.’

Gretchen Walsh has argued regarding the situation in academic libraries in the United States, that ‘the choices publishers make [about what to publish] cause difficulties for librarians trying to tailor a collection to specific curriculum needs. Publishers [ . . . ] want sales at least big enough to break even [ . . . ] This has meant, for instance, more books on South Africa [ . . . ] and fewer intensive studies of less well-known areas or issues.’ If this is true in North America, how much more difficult it is in Africa itself, with tiny publishing industries operating in ex-colonial languages and largely isolated from each other and from the larger world. But despite this, Walsh also recognises the importance of building a collection that allows the frog voices to be heard, pointing out that Africans do ‘study both themselves and the rest of the world,’ and arguing in favour of purchasing African imprints.

This is not to say, of course, that only Africans can write meaningfully about Africa. Harold Wolpe effectively dealt with this exclusivist perspective when he objected to the contention advanced by ‘black and feminist movements both in South Africa and elsewhere that no adequate account of the situation of such populations [as black people or women] can be produced except by actors whose experience is conditioned by their membership of the population in question.’ Such an explanation is unacceptable ‘since it reduces “explanation” to “experience” and denies the importance of theory.’

**CONCLUSION: THE ‘ADVANCE FROM NEUTRALITY’**

The idea that library practice is—or can be—in some sense ‘neutral’ or ‘value free’ is extraordinarily persistent, and is just as much an illusion in our work as it ever was in the social or natural sciences. Social scientific thinking begins with the recognition that social position determines the thinker’s view of the world: class, gender, and race being only
the most obvious aspects. The typology of problems identified in relation to African studies applies equally to the study of any subordinate social group’s contribution to history and society, often lost except in the physical artifacts left behind. We see the grandest of these as the product of the architect, artist or even patron, rather than of the workers who built them, *vide* Bertold Brecht. In the meantime, librarians grudgingly classify the less grand—posters, broadsheets, picture postcards, comic books, and all the other extraordinary signifiers of popular culture—as mere ‘ephemera.’52

Commentators operate—in an extreme form in the colonial case—from particular class, gender, and race positions, separating, differentiating, and theorising the socially inferior other—and library collections constitute commentary. Recognising this, librarians in Africa can work to transform African studies collections developed under colonial or *apartheid* domination, applying a critical gaze, periodising the collections’ history as social structures and beginning to ask what are the missing and oppressed voices? Broadly understood, archaeology, for instance, has an important role as a means of recovering the history of the oppressed, the forgotten and the lost. Libraries can cease to be mere warehouses and become living, ongoing celebrations of culture, comprehended as the material and ideational representation of human interactions. Such a library genuinely stands at the centre of the academic project and helps direct it, reworking history, reconstituting archaeology, collaborating with popular organisations to collect ‘ephemera’—the visual, written, sung, and pictured representations of local struggles and concerns.

In Africa, and especially in South Africa, we work with collections shaped by the changing academic and political interests of the academy. They are framed by such crudely physical expressions of unacceptable attitudes as the tableaux of the Khoi San in Cape Town’s Museum of Natural History, or human crania in the Anatomy Museum of the Cape Town Medical School. We must accept and openly confront the challenges that the new era poses to such *existing* collections. Librarians must engage with such questions as whether ‘African’ is an essential category or a social and socially fluid definition? How will we construct a new South African identity? What does it mean to celebrate diversity? How has colonial and independent Africa been constructed, politically and historically, and how do such constructions cut across older formations, with what consequences? What voices are excluded, and how can they be recovered, collected, and preserved in order to pose sharper questions in the present?
Empiricists have traditionally believed that researchers create knowledge through observation and the testing of data, which are objective and free of theoretical assumptions. The critique of this view in modern social science argues that researchers select data from the very beginning, basing decisions not only on explicit research values, but also on unexamined suppositions arising from the individual’s socialisation (the most obvious of which are race, class, and gender). Librarians have perhaps been slower than academic colleagues in recognising that what D. J. Foskett ironically termed the creed of the librarian, namely ‘no politics, no religion, no morals,’ is empty idealism. Even such an eminent figure as a recent president of the [British] Library Association can argue that libraries should be value-neutral institutions.53

The tradition of the opinionated librarian is also long and honourable. Half a century ago, Ernest Savage was enthusiastically recommending that librarians practice ‘attentive, critical, imaginative, retentive perusal’ of their stocks, adding that ‘any criticism [...] is of value [but] as a pointer, not as a verdict.’54 A few years ago Peter G. Underwood questioned the ethical basis of this kind of positivist library practice in a short piece significantly called ‘The advance from neutrality.’ Underwood argued that the traditional assumption that ‘libraries are neutral agencies, outside the struggle for democracy and redress’ simply did not hold water in the South African context (and by extension of the argument, probably nowhere else either). He argued that ‘information services should be aligned to the aspirations of the community they serve if they are to be effective,’ and that what was needed was ‘the evolution of an information science model which reflects cultural diversity.’55 Although he was referring mainly to community-based resource centres, it is not hard to see that an analogous argument can be made regarding academic institutions. Underwood’s attack on the positivism of library practice in South Africa was empirically based, not theoretical. But such writers as Froehlich have pointed out that it has long been held that information professionals need to be value-neutral, but that this has led to confusion over professional ethics. He contends that librarians in fact share a range of harmonious and consistent ethical values.56

At the beginning of this essay I posed two questions, namely whether we need to have African collections in African libraries at all, and if so, how to write collection development policies for them that make sense. In the light of the rest of this text, the answer to the first question may be a qualified and hesitant no, at least theoretically. But for many compel-
ling reasons, we are likely to continue with our special institutes, centres and foundations—if on no other grounds than that the dispersal of an existing collection is an enterprise to be undertaken only in the most exceptional of circumstances.

But separate collections have different rationales. The African Studies Library at the University of Cape Town, for example, is a dedicated research library, defined primarily although not exclusively by its research function rather than its subject coverage. There is considerable African material in the main collection, too, for undergraduate use, a circumstance that may not prevail elsewhere. Such items may, in fact, attract more active use when categorised by subject matter in the general collection—teaching in rural Africa sitting with teaching in rural China, rural Paraguay, or rural Sri Lanka.

The second question is more complex. I have argued that librarians have a responsibility to recognise that their practice cannot be value-free, and that their collections are biased by the choices made by writers, by publishers, and lastly by themselves. The duty, especially in Africa itself, is to ensure that African voices, frog voices, the voices of the self, are not drowned out by the dominant voices. This requires of librarians, I believe, a recognition of the existence of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o characterises as the three traditions of ‘literature’ from Africa—orature, Africans writing in European languages, and Africans writing in African languages.

Oral tradition is the ‘most ancient and the richest [tradition] in the African heritage.’57 Typically, librarians think in terms of recording, transcribing, translating, and fixing this tradition, but there may be alternatives. Academic institutions provide the economic foundation for thinkers and knowledge producers in the Western tradition, and there seems no good reason why this support could not be extended to those working in other traditions as well. A griot as a library staff member—well, why not? As librarians, we need to give voice through our collections policies to those Africans who write in and transform—even make African–European languages, including French and Portuguese as well as English. There is a sense in which these languages are no longer the exclusive private property of the metropole. Similarly and lastly, library collection policies in Africa—and above all in African studies collections—must firmly and actively support the development of writing and publishing in African languages.58
NOTES

1. Not just the United States, in other words. Canada, Mexico, Cuba, and Brazil, at least, have all had significant political and hence academic interest in Africa at various times.

2. It remains unclear whether there is any logical or theoretical difference between African studies in Africa, and African studies elsewhere in the world.


4. It is unclear whether this is the cause or the outcome of the parlous state of African publishing.

5. Specialisation in African library collections in African institutions is commonly national or regional rather than continental in focus and scope. Thus, for example, the library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, the resource centre of the Centro de Estudos Africanos and the library of the Arquivo Histórico in the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane in Mozambique, or the East Africana collection in the main library at the University of Dar es Salaam, all carry out to a greater or lesser extent the functions of national library collections. This does not affect the main line of my argument.


7. Mafeje makes the point that . . . Euro-Americans can easily talk and write about ‘African studies’ but not ‘African anthropology.’ The difference in connotation is not in the phraseology itself, which is perfectly symmetrical, but in the noun agency. In ‘African studies’ Africa is unambiguously the object, whereas ‘African anthropology’ could, among other things, refer to a specific claim by Africans. ‘Who are the makers and objects of anthropology? A critical comment on Sally Falk Moore’s Anthropology and Africa,’ African Sociological Review 1 (1) 1997:2.

8. Mahmood Mamdani, ‘Is African studies to be turned into a new home for Bantu education at UCT?’ in Teaching Africa: the curriculum debate at UCT (Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, s.d.) p. 42.


13. Tanzania’s politico-military role as the rear base for FRELIMO in the independence war in Mozambique (1964-1974), and its subsequent close involvement (1975-1980) in what became the Frontline States, both led logically to its inclusion in the originally anti-apartheid SADCC organisation set up in 1979-1980.


16. Afrocentrism in U.S. and Brazil has as much to do with domestic political issues around race as it has to do with African reality. Michael Turner of Hunter College is quoted as asking ‘Afrocentrism in relation to which Africa—the one with problems, or the one with kings and queens?’ Elio Gaspari, ‘As vozes da Africa,’ [The voices of Africa], *Veja* [Rio de Janeiro] 25 September 1991: 126.


20. E.g., Yohanna B. Abdallah, *Chiikala cha waYao* (Zomba: Govt. Printer, 1919) and reprints.


26. Of course, the political and intellectual work of W. E. B. DuBois in the series of Pan African Congresses between 1900 and 1945, and in such texts as *The world and Africa* (New York: The Viking Press; 1947) was immensely important, but belongs to a different and more honourable tradition than the British colonial one.


35. ‘Nzagwalu is an Igbo word meaning answering back–when you have suffered an insult, you have to answer back.’ Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: matriarchy, religion and culture* (London: Zed Books, 1997), p. 4.
44. Wolpe, Response.
47. I do not read this as a criticism of the library service. Martin is making two key points: there is a racial hierarchy in area studies, and the literature is underdeveloped in any case. (The number of African studies majors may also be a factor, of course). ‘Deposing Tarzan,’ p. 96. For later views, see William G. Martin and Michael O. West (eds.), *Out of one, many Africas: reconstructing the study and meaning of Africa* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
50. Wolpe, Response. There are other arguments against exclusivism, of course.
52. For example, the late Pierre Bourdieu viewed cultural taste as an important determinant of social class; most library collections can thus be seen as the expression of a dominant aesthetic based on class.
58. The argument justifying the assertion that librarians in Africa should support the development of writing and publishing in ‘African’ languages, I save for another essay. Nor do I intend here to enter the debate about what constitutes an ‘African’ language.