I am delighted to introduce myself as the 2011 Chair of the Africana Librarians Council (ALC). I have been a beneficiary of the work and mentorship of the ALC family for the past 24 years. In my earlier days as a graduate student of librarianship at UCLA, Joe Lauer shaped my understanding of this field and deepened my interest in it. It is therefore with deep gratitude that I serve ALC. I hope newer members feel as supported by more senior members as I have been. Our mission in ALC is to work on the preservation of, and access to, materials from and about Africa. As chair, with the help of the Executive, my goal is to sustain and expand this mission through new technologies and collaborative/cooperative initiatives. In partnership with other members of the African Studies community, ALC works closely with scholars, librarians, archivists and others across the world to improve access and preservation of Africana materials across disciplines and languages.

Founded in 1957 “as part of the African Studies Association (ASA) under the name Archives/Libraries Committee,” ALC today continues to emphasize the collective nature of Africana library work. This inclusive vision informs our recent and ongoing projects and initiatives in acquisitions, bibliography, preservation, access, and community-building. Such initiatives aim at connecting the intellectual, institutional, cultural and technological resources needed to understand and shape the complex world of Africana materials.

Today, Africana librarians find themselves at a crossroads in many aspects. The three that I would like to highlight are severe budget cuts, electronic publishing and its impact on the acquisition of Africana materials, and the attrition of Africana subject specialists in research libraries. When an institution is forced to absorb a major budget cut in a given fiscal period—and no part of the institution is unaffected by the cuts—how do we maintain the quality of Africana collections and research services...
New Africana Resources


The National Library Today

Arriving at the National Library this past summer, I immediately noticed the absence of the red and green books. Surprised, I asked a rather awkwardly worded question. “Where are the little books?” I said. My guide, a new librarian, did not know at first what I was talking about. After my embarrassing explanation he told me that the library had undergone a grooming operation lately and that the little books had to go. I did not have the presence of the mind to ask him who ordered that operation or where the little books had gone. Instead, I asked him about the current library materials, their types, formats, and the means of their acquisitions, the usual librarian’s questions I presume. Below I give a succinct report on what I learned.

As I indicated above, the old colonial building is far from adequate when it comes to housing library materials. Due to lack of space and equipment, books and archival materials had been piling up in a disorderly fashion in various areas of the library over several years. Recently, though, the archives have been moved into a brand new facility whose building was funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs thanks to the dynamic and tenacious efforts of the librarians who believe strongly in the importance of librarians’ advocacy role. Now the National Archive and the National Library stand side by side, although unequal in architectural design, space and functionality.

The Library

The library has about 18,500 books, 164 periodicals including 46 newspapers. It also has a special collection comprising maps and plans, music, coins and medals, prints and photographs, and manuscripts. The library’s collections represents about one fifth of the collections of the University of Togo in Lome. The library is organized into seven divisions: acquisitions, cataloging and indexing, periodicals, legal deposit, collections, international exchanges, and conservation and preservation. This structure, while impressive on paper, does not have enough personnel. The library as a whole suffers from a serious lack of staffing: there are only two trained librarians and a few people trained on the job to assist the librarians. It is hard to build up the required expertise through a professional development as these assistant librarians leave the library as soon as they get a permanent or well-paid job elsewhere.

Three areas of the Library caught my attention: the periodicals room which contains documents by and/or international organizations, the reading room for the periodicals, and the American Corner.

The International Documents Room

This room contains an impressive number of documents by and/or international organizations such as the UN, UNESCO, UNICEF, etc. with a clear dominance of the documents by UNESCO. The interest on the part of the library users in legal documents and resources on education, human and civil rights issues has increased tremendously since the political tussle between the opposition and the government, which resulted in the National Conference of 1991. Although the conference did not reach its initial objectives, it was successful in upsetting the culture of silence to some degree, awakening in the citizens an acute sense of freedom of expression and intensifying their hunger for information.

The Journal Reading Room

This is the busiest area of the Library. Here are kept all the local and foreign newspapers, a clear majority of which are acquired through copyright deposit. The room is small (about 4 meters by 4). People are so hungry for information on current political and economic events that there is often a long line of patrons waiting to read their favorite newspapers. I have not seen such lines anywhere else, except at the entrance of internet cafes, which are one of Africa’s most used providers of information and communication, second only to mobile phone technology dubbed “Africa’s silver bullet” (The Guardian) because of its perceived and/or observed transformative impact on self-employed people and small businesses which, it is hoped, will promote Africa’s economic development.

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to the scholarly community that depends on the materials? Coupled with budget cuts, e-publishing and outsourcing to aggregators have already decreased our ability to subscribe to core serials in African Studies. Print publishing is collapsing while e-reading devices and electronic books become more popular and relatively less expensive. We know, however, that printed books are still preferred by many in African Studies. But print-on-demand technology allows readers to print out text conveniently and cheaply. What type of choices do we have, as Africana collection specialists, in this changing information environment? With the economic downturn and the continuing pressure to focus institutional resources on “core” programs and services, we are beginning to witness changes in the landscape of Africana subject specialty. Many Africana librarians have been forced to become generalists or “jacks of all trades” with varying levels of satisfaction. How can we serve this important field of Area Studies adequately when the central mandate of our job is not African Studies?

These are issues that do not leave the Africana Librarians Council indifferent. I see them as an opportunity for ALC to become more engaged in advocacy and partnerships not only within ALC, but also with others who face similar issues from different disciplines and other Area Studies. These issues provide an impetus to work with others on projects and initiatives that make Africana information accessible to many at less cost. If there has ever been a time when open-source, institutional repositories, cooperative acquisitions, and shared print archives of Africana materials was needed, this is certainly it. We are fortunate to be in a position to serve as agents of change in this time.

The two formal ALC gatherings for this year will serve as forums to continue informing ourselves on these issues. At the spring meeting at Ohio University in Athens, we will examine these issues in our various working meetings. The culmination of these deliberations will be the ALC panel at the ASA meeting in Washington, D.C in the fall. Clearer outcomes will be determined by all the ideas that will be shared in person and via email or other forms of communication deemed necessary.

The ALC panel proposal submitted in March will focus on “New Models in Research and Publishing in African Studies.” This panel was organized in collaboration with CAMP (Cooperative African Materials Project). Africanist scholars and librarians on the panel will provide a survey of several cutting-edge models including open-access journal publishing, institutional repositories, not for profit/commercial partnerships and resource sharing arrangements between U.S. and African universities.

Finally, I would like to thank our past-Chair, Deborah LaFond, for her work and contributions to ALC.

I am particularly grateful to my outstanding Executive Board members and all ALC committee members for their dedication, leadership and vision. Due to various constraints, all members of ALC cannot participate in the face-to-face exchange that meetings make possible. But Karen Fung puts countless hours in the ALC discussion list that enables members to interface and share timely information generating invaluable support. I thank her for her contributions. Last but not least, I would like to thank Tim Johnson (continuing co-editor), Bassey Irele (outgoing co-editor) and Miriam Conteh-Morgan (incoming co-editor) for having implemented a more reader-friendly format for ALN and for continually finding innovative ways for the ALC community to share information that matters to our work. I would also like to welcome new members of ALC.

I look forward to working with all of you this year to strengthen the legacy upon which ALC was founded and to ensure that ALC continues to thrive. Best wishes for 2011 and see you in Athens, Ohio, in April and in Washington, D.C. in November!
The National Archive

The new building is spacious. It has three rooms: the first room contains the materials on the German colonial period, the second room the materials relative to the short British colonial period, and the French post-colonial period. The third room is a reading room. There is a brand new microfiche reader but no microfiche, and there are microfilms but no microfilm reader. This was apparently the result of a mismatch. The archives undertakes a periodic collection of archival documents throughout the country. Many local institutions want to get rid of archival documents in their possession and threaten to destroy them if the National Archive does not take them right away. The National Archive does everything it can to take the documents, but because the archivists do not have the legal document that would allow them to deposit them into the National Archive, they toss them into a corner of a room hoping to be able to deal with them later, that ‘later’ that metamorphoses into a ‘forever’ for lack of resources. As is the case of the library, these problems were compounded by the lack of staffing: the Archives have only one archivist and a couple of people trained on the job to help serve the patrons.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, the state of the National Library of Togo was a reflection of the country’s cultural slump. On the national level, the ideological push for the practice of traditional cultures for political gain had led to the neglect, if not the forgetting of the library’s collection building. On the individual level, some library users had used their social status to abuse their borrowing rights, which had contributed to the depletion of one of the most precious common goods that a nation can ever possess: information resources. Today, this period of cultural slump for the library seems to have come to an end, pushed away by a combination of at least three factors: the slow but steady political return of Togo into the international community, the increasing realization, on the part of the citizens, of the empowering the legitimate and irrepresible desire of the Togolese to become world citizens. Enabled by the above mentioned changes, the National Library of Togo has taken some baby steps toward making progress in several areas. This is due for the most part to the willingness of the librarians and their determination to turn their library into a functional information center and an important instrument of development of their country in the 21st century. But the library has a very long way to go before it can achieve even its modest goals. The catalog is still a card catalog and the library does not have a web presence, which limits its visibility and its communication with the outside world. Therefore, the potential for sharing resources with other local and international information centers is seriously limited. This technological weakness also prevents the librarians from using best practices developed by other institutions to improve and grow.

The lack of funds to develop the collections and expand the space to house them is another impediment faced by the National Library. The Government made several promises in the past with regard to capacity building and collection development, but these promises have remained empty. The librarians understand that they are engaging in an uphill battle. For in a country whose shaky economy has been further weakened by a decade of isolation from the international community due to the government’s human rights violations, and where there has not been a strong tradition of building information infrastructure, the library is not high on the list of priorities for the national development plan. Nonetheless, they continue to renew their requests politely, but firmly.

The librarians are hoping to get a boost from their cooperation with regional and international library organizations but, as stated above, insufficient visibility and lack of support from the politicians responsible for the Library’s legislation make the realization of their goals for a library that reflects and interacts with the modern world, well…perpetually.
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ALC Panel at 2011 ASA Meeting

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scholarly information more widely available. The global economic downturn has driven innovation on the part of these stakeholders in devising non-traditional partnerships to create infrastructures for this purpose. This panel provides a survey of several cutting-edge models including: open access journal publishing; institutional repositories (fully indexed by Google); not-for-profit/commercial partnerships; and resource sharing arrangements between US and African universities. Associated with a number of these projects is the Center for Research Libraries and its affiliate group, the Cooperative Africana Materials Project, a consortium of North American (and some European) research libraries that collaboratively acquires and preserves Africana primary source materials.”

The panel will be chaired by ALC Chair Emielie Songo (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Ed Miner (University of Iowa- Iowa City. Speakers will include Marion Frank-Wilson (Indiana University), Derek Peterson (University of Michigan), Verlon Stone (Indiana University), and Peter Limb (Michigan State University).

ASA Book Donations Program

The ALC is again organizing the ASA Gretchen Walsh Book Donations Award. Applications for the 2011 cycle are due on May 31, 2011.

The ASA offers this annual grant program to assist book donation projects with shipping costs to send book donations to African libraries and schools. The Africana Librarians Council, Gretchen Walsh Book Donation Committee reads grant proposals and makes recommendations to ASA. Successful awards are usually small grants in amounts from $200 to $1000.

Last year’s awards went to the Sivulamehlo Book Project in Steenbok, South Africa; the EMA Foundation in Burhmansdrift, South Africa; the Lycee Classique Library in Bouake, Cote d’Ivoire; and the Chinsali School District in Zambia.

For more information see the ALC website or contact David Westley at dwestley@bu.edu.

News from the African Books Collective

The African Books Collective will shortly be operating fully independently in the U.S. For all new titles from January 2011, orders should be directed to orders@africanbookscollective.com From May 1, 2011, all orders should be directed to ABC. In any case all orders can henceforth be directed to ABC who will ensure fulfilment. Orders may also be placed direct with YBP, which should show ABC titles from 2007 “in stock” as they are set up POD with Baker & Taylor. Whilst ABC is not currently proposing to establish a U.S. address, all orders direct to ABC will be processed from within the U.S., i.e. orders will be fulfilled by Lightning Source digital printer; and invoices give payment details in the U.S.

Recent additions of new publishers are Editions Yeelen (Mali) and Manila Publishers (Nigeria). Further publishers forthcoming are from Sudan and Tanzania.

New Africana Twitter Feed

Peter Limb has started an Africana/African Studies libraries/information Twitter feed at http://twitter.com/pclimb. It will include new African studies sites, significant new acquisitions (archives, films/sets, digital libraries/packages), events, etc.

An ALC panel at the 2010 ASA meeting.
"Open Access to Information" was the theme of the Ghana Library Association (GLA) 2010 Biennial Congress, which I attended as a Resource Person and presented a paper on open access discovery tools. Held December 16-17, 2010 at the Great Hall of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, it attracted librarians from institutions of higher learning, public libraries and corporate libraries in Ghana. The GLA was founded in 1962 as the body representing libraries and information services in Ghana. Its mission is to serve the “professional development and educational needs of its members and to provide leadership and direction in developing and improving library and information services in the country.”

In opening remarks Professor Williams Otoo Ellis, university Vice Chancellor, stressed the importance of technology, information generation and training as critical elements for open access to information. He urged the librarians to keep abreast with current trends in information dissemination technologies in order to offer efficient services to information seekers. He also implored researchers and organizations to freely make available research findings and other vital information critical to knowledge production through open access.

Mrs. Valentina J.A. Bannerman, President of GLA, in her welcome address called for adequate funding of libraries to empower them to perform their role of facilitating access to information and stressed the importance of information communication technology in the country’s libraries to enhance easy access to information. She pointed out that "knowledge is critical to the growth of society," and the lack thereof is ... a serious obstacle to Ghana’s national development.

Papers presented related to this year’s theme of open access to information; open access to information in Africa, providing new opportunities for knowledge development; institutional repositories, issues and challenges in Africa; an overview of selected open access discovery tools; and role of ICT applications in open access.

The lead paper by Dr. Buhle Mbambo-Thata, University Librarian, University of South Africa (UNISA) and IFLA Africa Section President, discussed the potential of open access information in Africa, including visibility of African scholarship, opportunity to shape digital knowledge and the expanding of African ways of learning, teaching and research.

The papers presented generated lively discussions. Many librarians stressed the need for introducing new technologies such as blogs to libraries in Ghana and the role they will play in disseminating information to library users. They also lamented the high turnover of information technology professionals in Ghanian libraries and suggested ways in which this could be remedied. The librarians also stressed that to train effective professionals there is the need for the University of Ghana Library School to work closely with the Association to determine the needs of the profession. A commemorative cloth for the association was unveiled at the conference as well as a demonstration of the association’s new Internet Portal. More details of the conference could be accessed at the association’s website: http://www.gla-net.org/