Gatekeeper, gateway, gate opener? 75 years of ASCL collection development

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Sometime in the early 1980s, I had to write a *werkstuk* in primary six about the Second World War. The place to be was the public library, but unfortunately the topic was considered as an 'adults only' subject and therefore not accessible for primary school pupils. The librarian was willing to guide me (literally upstairs) to the adult section, sitting next to me during the time I needed to copy the relevant sections from several books. Taking home these titles was absolutely forbidden.

Gatekeeper-gateway

At the end of the past millennium, in 1999, the International Library Federation IFLA prepared a statement on libraries and intellectual freedom in which they reflected on the changing role of libraries. They acknowledged that libraries no longer have the monopoly on reliable knowledge, nor do they have the authority to select what information people should see or should not see. Instead of a gatekeeper, IFLA visualised a publicly funded library as an institution serving as a gateway to knowledge, thought and culture and 'facilitating access to expressions of knowledge and intellectual

activity. To this end, libraries shall acquire, preserve and make available the widest variety of materials, reflecting the plurality and diversity of society.' [24]

In the scenario of gateway, libraries do no longer necessarily own all the materials. Now the library pays for access (similar to a toll gate on the highway) to information in different formats such as databases, intelligence, dissertations, and peer-reviewed articles, serving patrons with this 'wide variety of materials.' This, according to some, rather passive role is further undermined by the seemingly endless information on the World Wide Web, accessible without any brokerage of libraries.

Gate-opener

Today, almost a quarter of a century later, in a reflection on their website, the IFLA pictures a much more active role as gate-opener, in which the library is a place where people may 'develop the skills [...] to use and interact with information.'[25] A basic assumption underlying this vision is 'to recognise that there is often no one right answer, but degrees of accuracy and reliability [...].' So we are still at the gate, but now providing maps to navigate the information overload and hopefully without the patronising attitude from the past.

Both from a personal and a professional perspective I can do nothing else than wholeheartedly approve this concept of gate-opener. In this way, the library could contribute to the ASCL's mission to 'promote a better understanding of and insight into historical, current and future developments in Africa.'[26]

Confront the biases

However, and here the question mark in the title comes in, information and knowledge are not passive things, which automatically enter the mind of our visitors when we open the gate. Knowledge is controlled in subtle ways. At all stages, from defining a research topic through data collection and publishing, biases creep in. And even after that, collection development is not something neutral; a vision corroborated by colleagues in African Studies libraries. Kevin Wilson, collection development librarian at LSE, in 2022 wrote:

24 IFLA statement on libraries and intellectual freedom, https://repository.ifla.org/bitstream/123456789/1424/1/ifla-statement-on-libraries-and-intellectual-freedom-en.pdf

25 https://blogs.ifla.org/faife/2019/07/17/from-gatekeeper-to-gateway-to-gate-opener-the-changing-role-of-libraries-and-how-we-talk-about-it/

26 https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/about-ascl

> 'We cannot take library collections – how they are developed, described and discovered – at face value. We need to confront the biases that exist within those collections and, often, ourselves.'[27]

Colin Darch, senior information specialist, Cape Town, wrote in 2004:

> '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.'

So that begs the question: How good are we in our relatively new role as gate-opener?

Based on a collection assessment performed by Jan-Maarten van Westen (2016), the ASCL Library owns 75% of all French and English-language academic sources which are quoted in current research, and it gives access through national interlibrary loan to 90%. This might be perceived as adequate, but most likely this is not an outcome of good policy, but rather a result of budget and methodology of the assessment. The obvious biases here are the language choices (French and English) and the material (secondary, academic publications). So let us now consider four different information materials relevant for the study of African societies and evaluate our gate-opening role here.

Important for whom?

Ali bin Hemed al Buhriy (1889-1957), a famous East African religious scholar and poet, was perceived as an expert in his field.[28] Until recently we only had a small collection of his translated poetry and one book of his enormous legal oeuvre, also in English translation (Al-Buhriy, 1959). Apart from the fact that he wrote in a non-European language (Swahili) and partly in a non-European script (Arabic), the religious subjects were of little interest to European libraries. When his first book in Swahili was published (instead of Arabic), a

27 Kevin Wilson, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2022/03/04/we-cannot-take-library-collections-at-face-value-we-need-to-confront-the-biases-that-exist-within-those-collections-and-often-ourselves/

28 See Joseph Schachts comments on him: [Shaykh Ali was] 'the most learned Shafi'i scholar I have met' and 'quite the most learned shari'a lawyer in Tanganyika' (Nimtz, 1980, p. 23 and Anderson, 1954, p. 137).

German scholar wrote in his review that *'…der Traktat in wissenschaftlicher und religiöser Beziehung nichts Neues bringt'* ('in scientific and religious respects the tract offers nothing new') (Dammann, 1936). The title was never included in the ASCL Library collection.

Practical considerations

Another important but underrepresented source in the ASCL Library is African newspapers. As Hartmut Bergenthum (2014) describes, the collection and preservation of this material in an online world faces a lot of problems. Limitations in budget, irregularities in logistics, issues of preservation, microfilming and the necessity to cooperate with other European collections to create a critical mass all make newspaper collecting a tricky thing.

Like newspapers, no one disputes the importance of educational materials for African Studies. And like newspapers, the systematic collection of those materials remains a challenge for libraries. As far as my knowledge goes, only the Georg Eckert Institute in Germany claims to develop a good collection in this field, although the number of African textbooks is significantly lower than that of Western counterparts. Here, libraries face specific problems in the book chain, e.g. direct delivery from publishers to schools, bypassing commercial circuits, and the progressive digitisation of the materials.

'Literature' or 'romantic fiction'?

A final example is fiction. In this field the ASCL may boast of a fairly good selection of novels, poetry and drama from the African continent. As in the earlier examples, here African languages are, justifiably or not, underrepresented. However, even when we look at productions in colonial languages, it becomes clear that the collection is biased towards western audiences. An example is the Ghanaian writer Asare Konadu. Heinemann African Writers Series published three of his novels and they are available in our collection. However, under his pen name Kwabena Asare Bediako, Konadu was known all over West Africa for writing a completely different genre, with titles such as *Don't leave me Mercey* and *A husband for Esi Ellua* (Newell, 2000).

The social life of books

So there are biases in collection development, and often we are aware of this fact without being able to successfully confront it. When writers don't

feel free to write about a particular subject, their book will not find its way into our collection. If your manuscript is not accepted by a publisher, it is unlikely we will become aware of it. Colin Darch's quote in the beginning is important because it gives us an insight in book selection biases as part of a much more complex, dynamic process. At each stage, from the initial conception of ideas to production of texts in whatever form, and finally book production, dissemination and reception, decisions are made and biases can creep in. And that brings me to the greatest flaw in the metaphor of the gate as the essential function of a library: it presents information as unconnected, neutral, value-free and disembodied.

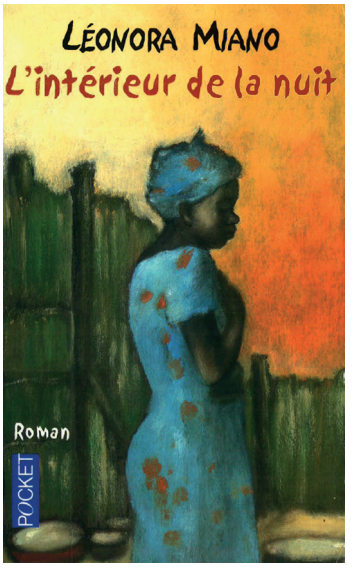
In order to confront these biases in collection development we have to look at texts, data, and knowledge from a more dynamic and social perspective. We might look at the ways how anthropologists, historians and philologists treat texts. Arjun Appadurai's seminal work *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (1986) and the subsequent academic research based on his ideas might be a good starting point for collection development. For example, sometimes a (religious) book is reprinted in identical form with just one addition: 'This book is a gift and may not be sold'. Or with a supplementary text: 'Please pray for our deceased mother so and so.' These additions might be a justification for collecting both copies. The materiality of '(...) books as artefacts with aesthetic value and individual histories that need to be grounded in a more general "history of the book"' and as objects that 'have histories of movement inscribed on them through space and time' (Jeppie, 2008) will lead our collections in a different direction.

Multiple versions

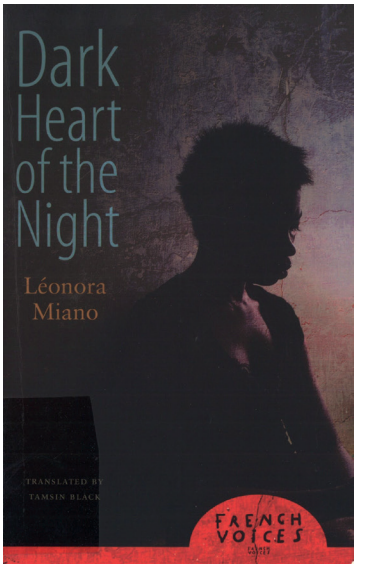
By way of conclusion I will give two examples of collection items, of which the inclusion in the collection has been inspired by the attempt to go beyond a static view of information and texts. They show the dynamics of knowledge production, and provide material traces of these processes. First, the novel *l'Intérieur de la nuit*, written by the Cameroonian writer Léonora Miano in 2010. This book, of course, deserved a place in our collection. A few years later the book was translated into English with the title *Dark heart of the night*. The writer had serious problems not only with the title (which echoes the 'heart of darkness' literature of orientalists) but especially with Terese Svoboda's foreword. Miano wrote her profound disagreement on literary platform *the complete review*,[29] and in the next editions the foreword was

29 https://www.complete-review.com/reviews/frafrica/mianol.htm

removed. From the perspective of books as having a 'social life', both editions need to be collected.



Book cover *L'intérieur de la nuit* by Léonora Miano.



Book cover *Dark heart of the night* by Léonora Miano in English translation.

Kanga or tanga?

Finally a more tragic example. In the rape trial of former president Jacob Zuma, a kanga, a rectangular cotton piece of cloth that is used as a wrap all over Africa, played a major role. Zuma admitted he had had sex with the claimant, Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo (1974-2016). He testified in defence of his behaviour that Kuzwayo wanted to have sexual intercourse with him because she was wearing a knee-length skirt and later that evening only a kanga. The erotic connotations ascribed to the kanga might have found their way into the first version of the verdict, written by the white male Willem van der Merwe (2006): throughout the document - which was posted on several socials immediately after the trial - the word kanga is spelled as 'tanga'. In the official version published later by the Southern African Legal Information Institute, the word was spelled correctly. This suggests that the judge wasn't aware of the many roles of the kanga as communicative tool and social marker. Only the first version of the verdict ended up in the ASCL collection and for a good reason. By collecting these different manifestations of documents instead of just the final 'true' edition, libraries may stimulate

new questions and act as true gate-openers doing justice to the rich social contexts of African texts.

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