

## Who was to blame? The genealogy of the “Anglo-American” national library service model

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### **Abstract:**

*As the emerging nations of Anglophone Sub-Saharan Africa achieved political independence, most of them attempted to create national library services that would, from a central headquarters located in the capital city, develop public libraries, first in the provinces or regions and then at district or branch level. This ‘national library service’ model, which has been generally considered to be an “Anglo-American” import, has been widely condemned as one of the factors inhibiting public library development in Africa. From a historical perspective it offers an interesting example of colonial and post-colonial influence. Although the idea of the free public library is undoubtedly of Anglo-American origin, nation-wide public library structures have neither British nor US antecedents. Who, therefore, should be credited with, or blamed for, this idea? In this paper I consider a number of “suspects”, with emphasis on the influences converging at, and radiating from, the 1953 Ibadan Seminar on the Development of Public Libraries in Africa, before concluding that the wide dissemination of the model in Anglophone Africa cannot be attributed to the influence of a few prominent library personalities, to the Seminar, or to the authority of UNESCO or IFLA alone. Rather, it must be seen in terms of pragmatic, albeit ideologically coloured, responses to the colonial situation, developed in the context of the decolonization process, the Cold War, and contemporary understandings of development.*

**Keywords:** Anglophone Africa; National library services; Public libraries; Anglo-American influence; Ibadan Seminar 1953

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

A striking feature of library development in most of the former British colonies in Africa is the creation of national library services which were intended to serve an entire country. The process started during the decade before independence and continued during the 1960s, with Zimbabwe following suit in 1982 (Sturges 2001, 38–39) and Namibia in 2000 (Namhila and

Niskala 2013). The mandate of the Kenya National Library Service (KNLS), which was founded in 1967 after a long gestation period, serves as an example of their ambitious scope:

[...] to promote, establish, equip, manage, maintain, and develop libraries in Kenya as a National Library Service. Based on a strong central library, it aimed to develop public libraries first at the provincial or area level and then at the district or branch level, while maintaining postal services to individuals and block borrowing to institutions (Rosenberg 1993, n.p.).

The national library services have come in for much criticism. Sturges and Neill (1998, 82) damned them with faint praise, saying that “[t]heir success has been, to put it kindly, mixed.” In his seminal article on “the librarianship of poverty”, Kingo Mchombu (1982, 245–246) commented on the overambitious efforts that resulted in little more than the creation of a headquarters library in the capital city, leaving no resources for outreach into the rest of the country: “After more than 15 years of existence, and expenditure of millions of shillings, many public library systems have not yet succeeded in serving more than 1% of the population of their areas.”

The national library service model offers an interesting example of colonial and post-colonial influence. It has generally been considered to be an Anglo-American model and it has been widely condemned as one of the factors inhibiting public library development in Africa. However, Diana Rosenberg has challenged the assumption that the national library services concept was attributable to Anglo-American influence. Although the idea of the free public library is undoubtedly of Anglo-American origin, nation-wide public library structures have neither British nor US antecedents (Rosenberg 1993; Rosenberg 1994). Both the British and the American public library systems are decentralized, being locally governed and funded. Who, therefore, should be credited with, or blamed for, this idea?

## **2 THE 1953 IBADAN SEMINAR**

Few general accounts of library development in Africa fail to mention the influence of the “Ibadan Seminar”. The Seminar on the Development of Public Libraries in Africa took place under the aegis of UNESCO in Ibadan, Nigeria, from 27 July to 21 August 1953 (UNESCO 1954). This was the fourth in a series of meetings on public library development organized by UNESCO. It has been widely seen as a significant event in the development of librarianship in Africa (e.g. Anafulu 1976, 397; Kaungamno 1985, 270–272). Aguolo (1980, 404–405) judged that it “laid the foundation for the development of libraries and librarianship in Africa”. Its impact seems to have been felt mainly in Anglophone Africa.

The Seminar reflected UNESCO’s concern with literacy. In Africa, UNESCO saw a “clear-cut and urgent need for public library services”, given that “people are being helped by mass education programmes to emerge from illiteracy and ignorance”. It was thought that the newly literate needed access to literature, without which they would “slide back into illiteracy” (UNESCO 1954, 14). Today we see this language, which appears to assume a one-way flow of assistance to helpless Africans, as paternalistic.

Judging by the participants, the Seminar was very much a one-way process. Of the 29 “librarians and educators” from more than 16 African territories only eight were Africans. Although the course director of the Seminar was Mlle Yvonne Oddon, a French librarian,

French influence was very limited. This is evident from the reading lists provided to participants. The works listed were overwhelmingly in English, from the American and British public library literature. At the Seminar three groups were formed to study the three main problems. The first of these was given the theme “Organizing Public Library Services on a Regional or National Scale”. It was led by Edward Sydney, Borough Librarian of Leyton, England. All the “principal papers” for this Working Group had English-speaking authors. They included Sydney himself, Miss Evelyn Evans, Director of Library Services, Gold Coast Library Board, about whom more later, and G. Annesley, whose working paper on “Steps in planning public library services in an African territory” seems to have outlined the main points to be covered by the group (UNESCO 1954, 21).

Given this background it is not surprising that the group recommended that the UNESCO Public Libraries Manifesto, *The public library: a living force for popular education* (UNESCO 1949), be accepted, “in principle, as a statement of the basic policy and purposes on which national public library service should be established in Africa” (UNESCO 1954, 25). The Manifesto was a general statement of UNESCO’s belief in the value of public libraries. Specifically it stated that

As a democratic institution, operated by the people for the people, the public library should be: established and maintained under clear authority of law; supported wholly or mainly from public funds; open for free use on equal terms to all members of the community, regardless of occupation, creed, class or race (UNESCO 1949, 1).

In addition to endorsing the Public Library Manifesto, the group recommended

... that the sole public library authority in African territories should be the national or state agency set up by the government. The devolution of authority will depend on the progress of local authorities and their capacity to provide their share of the costs of an adequate service (UNESCO 1954, 23)

Given this statement it is not surprising that the adoption of the Anglo-American model has often been attributed to this Seminar. We therefore need to look more closely at the influences that converged there.

### **3 THE INFLUENCE OF UNESCO**

Sturges and Neill (1998, 82) described the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto as a carrier of Anglo-American library ideas. While the authorship of the Manifesto is unclear, there is little doubt about the dominance of British and American influences in UNESCO during its first decade. UNESCO’s first Director-General (1946-1948) was Julian Huxley, a British scientist. During the period 1953 to 1958 Luther Evans, who had been the Librarian of Congress, was the Director-General (Valderrama 1995, 29, 80). The first head of UNESCO’s Libraries Division, Edward J. Carter, was a Briton whose previous position had been as the Librarian of the Royal Institute of British Architects (Parker 1985, 97). Everett N. Petersen, UNESCO’s first “Head of Public Library Development”, was an American librarian whose previous position had been at the Detroit Public Library. The lists of participants at the Ibadan Seminar and of the discussion papers presented there, clearly illustrate the Anglo-American dominance. The Soviet Union, which had a highly centralized library system, only joined UNESCO in 1954 and was not in a position to influence UNESCO’s library policies

during the period when UNESCO's library policies were shaped (cf. Parker 1985, 80). There was some Scandinavian participation in the UNESCO seminars, but Scandinavian librarians did not exercise a major influence (Parker 1985, 76–77).

#### **4 AMERICAN INFLUENCE?**

Although British and American ideas dominated UNESCO's library development activities and specifically the Ibadan Seminar, this does not explain where the idea of a *national* library service came from. Tracing the history of the concept, Sturges (2001, 39) suggested that the idea of a national library service seems to have first emerged in a "well-articulated version" in a recommendation made by Dugald Niven, Chief Librarian of the Bulawayo Public Library, to S.A. Pitt and Milton J. Ferguson when they visited Southern and Eastern Africa in 1928 to investigate library conditions for the Carnegie Corporation of New York. In a later report to the Carnegie Corporation D.H. Varley (1953), then Director of the South African Public Library, Cape Town, developed the idea further. Sturges (2001, 39) saw the Rhodesian concept as something of an evolutionary dead end, suggesting that it was unlikely that the idea would have been transmitted from Southern Africa to East and West Africa.

It is interesting to note here that the idea of a national public library infrastructure for developing countries was not foreign to the Carnegie Corporation (cf. Parker 1985, 78–81), being evident in Carnegie interventions in South Africa and New Zealand (Rochester 1981, 423–428). Nevertheless, there is little evidence of direct Carnegie influence in the origins of the national library service model in Africa. During the post-war decade, neither the Carnegie Corporation nor the United States government engaged in significant library-related aid in Africa (Brewster 1976, 29, 114, 118). Thus direct US influence during the 1950s was limited.

#### **5 BRITISH ORIGINS?**

For the origins of the "Anglo-American" model it is to Britain rather than the US that we should turn.

The British Council, set up in the 1930s to promote Britain abroad, is frequently mentioned in connection with public library development in Anglophone Africa. Although its cultural diplomacy was primarily aimed at promoting British influence and exports, the work of the British Council in promoting library development in the former colonies was significant (Kaungamno 1985, 266–267). In 1959 a government statement on the objectives of the British Council included "the development of library systems in emerging Commonwealth countries, including the establishment of central libraries, book vans and book boxes" (cited by White 1970, 260). The British Council had been involved in public library development in Africa since the 1940s, when it opened fee-charging libraries in Lagos and Accra. In 1950 the library in Accra was handed over to the Gold Coast Library Board, which was set up for this purpose. The British Council librarian responsible for the Accra library, Evelyn J.A. Evans, was transferred to the Board as its first director and on that platform she built up a national public library service which was regarded as the best (and only) one in West Africa (Lancour 1958, 11–13; Olden 1995, 11). It was so highly regarded that participants in the Ibadan Seminar were afforded the opportunity to stop over in Accra to see the Scheme. Ten did (UNESCO 1954, 16). Evans also presented a paper at the Seminar. While not advocating a national scheme, her paper assumed its existence (Evans 1954). It is

here, in the Gold Coast (Ghana) in the 1940s and 1950, that Sturges (2001) traced the origins of the national library service idea.

Evelyn Evans was influential well beyond the Gold Coast. She was involved in formulating proposals for a similar national library board in Sierra Leone, and her ideas about legislation for such agencies were widely followed elsewhere in Africa. But although she travelled through the Gold Coast tirelessly investigating conditions and promoting the library services, Sturges (2001, 40) judged that her ideas were not informed by a well-grounded understanding of the needs of the population to be served, but that “[s]he clearly felt that she knew what was needed and sought information that would enable her to provide services of a kind familiar to her from her own experience.” Evans was one of a number of British expatriates who played leading roles in the development of public libraries in Africa. Like Evans, many of them had come to Africa from a background in British city and county libraries. It would have been natural for them to try to replicate the organizational form with which they were familiar. Given the insignificant public library establishment in the colony, the British county or city library structure of a central library with branches and depots could simply be scaled up, without taking into account social, economic, administrative and cultural differences.

But this does not satisfactorily explain how the service developed by a remarkable British woman in Ghana came to gain the canonical status of an “Anglo-American” national library service model. Here I suggest that we need to consider the influence at the time of the leading British advocate for public librarianship, Lionel McColvin. McColvin never worked in Africa but arguably had a major influence on the dissemination there of the national library service concept. McColvin authored two of the UNESCO public library manuals (McColvin 1949; McColvin 1957a). He also wrote an influential book on international public librarianship (McColvin 1957b). He has been described as a visionary, and as the outstanding personality of his generation in British public librarianship (Black 2004). His influential report and proposals for modernizing British public libraries, drawn up during the Second World War, reflected an idealistic vision of the public libraries as part of “a truly nation-wide system, efficient, properly organised and co-ordinated, adequately financed...” (McColvin, cited in Black 2004, 9).

From its inception McColvin had played a significant role in shaping UNESCO’s library activities, this influence being channelled through the Library Association and the British Council (Parker 1985, 85–101). McColvin’s influence was also exercised through IFLA, where he served as chairman of what became IFLA’s Public Libraries Section, from 1952 to 1960 (Thompson 1968, 77–80), and as a vice-president of IFLA from 1953 to 1960 (Wilhite 2012, 149, 166). In 1953 his section produced a policy memorandum, *The development of public library services: a working paper* (reproduced in McColvin 1957b, 252–263). From the text it is obvious that McColvin must have had a strong influence on its formulation. In the document a carefully argued case is made out for the public library as a comprehensive, general service, free, publicly funded service open to all, but it is somewhat ambivalent regarding the respective roles of national and local authorities in establishing and maintaining public library services. It emphasizes that public libraries need to be grounded in their communities, but where local authorities are weak, a regional or national authority should be created and states should pass library legislation. This opened up possibilities for “passing the buck” and doing nothing.

When one compares the proceedings and recommendations of the Ibadan Seminar with the Public Library Section’s working paper of 1953, the language used is strikingly similar. The

British county and borough librarians who went to Africa to set up national library services would have been advancing in their careers in Britain while McColvin was the dominant influence in their profession. McColvin must have exercised a very considerable influence on the development of the national library service concept.

## **6 CONTEXTUAL FACTORS**

The foregoing does not mean that McColvin is to be credited with, or blamed for, the model. McColvin himself did not push for national library services, but in putting forward the option of a centralized national system for countries in which local authorities were poorly developed, he opened the way for expatriates faced with just such a situation to choose this option, and for those gathered at the Ibadan Seminar to promote it. The wide dissemination of the idea in Anglophone Africa cannot be attributed to the influence of one woman, one man, a group of expatriate library directors, a seminar, or the authority of UNESCO and IFLA alone. Rather, the dissemination of the model should be seen in terms of pragmatic, albeit ideologically coloured, responses to the colonial situation, developed in the context of the decolonization process, the Cold War, and contemporary understandings of development.

Focusing on the decolonization process, and examining the example of Kenya, Rosenberg (1993) argued that the founding of the Kenya National Library Service (KNLS) in 1967 was not the result of an indigenous political or cultural movement, or of enthusiasm on the part of the post-independence government, but rather a product of a British policy to retain control of the former colonies. Once it was realized that independence was inevitable, British policy aimed to ensure that British influence was maintained after independence:

Provision of a centrally controlled public library system was part of the decolonization strategy. It would encourage the ideas of democracy and responsible citizenship and at the same time give the state a monopoly on the supply and control of information (Rosenberg 1993, n.p.).

Rosenberg thus concluded that the KNLS was “a creation of the departing colonial state” which “did not have its roots in Kenyan society”. The British Council too, although deeply involved, had been merely executing British government policy, “an implementer rather than an initiator” (Rosenberg 1993, n.p.)

Decolonization and post-independence development took place against the background of the Cold War, which pitted the Western democracies against the Soviet Union and its socialist allies. UNESCO was caught up in this struggle, as was IFLA (Davis and Feis 2001). As mentioned earlier, Anglo-American influence in UNESCO was very strong. Socialist countries played a minor role, at least until the Soviet Union joined UNESCO in 1954. Bengé (1979, 220) asserted that initially UNESCO’s cultural policies were solely based on the Anglo-American tradition. This also applied to UNESCO’s library work. Laugesen (2009, 70) placed UNESCO’s library work against the background of attempts by the USA to project “a US vision of a preferred world order”:

...much of the library work of Unesco can be seen as a product of an Anglo-American intellectual faith in the efficacy of public libraries and public education - inherently tied to their political ideologies and values.

In this context the contemporary rhetoric about education, citizenship and democracy left unstated an underlying aim to counter Soviet propaganda. This helps to explain American and British support – directly through their own agencies, and indirectly through organizations such as UNESCO – for the dissemination of a centralized, top-down model, the collections and services of which can be more readily controlled than in the case of multiple small libraries created through community initiatives.

Finally I note here that during the period under discussion, the dominant theory of development was that of modernization (Rist 1997, 93–103; Haynes 2008, 20–24), according to which all nations were expected to follow a universal pattern of development. Development was seen as something that developing nations underwent, as passive recipients of ideas and technology from developed countries. Since libraries were seen by McColvin and many in his generation as universal, public library development everywhere was expected ultimately to follow the same trajectory as in the developed nations (cf. Laugesen 2014, 3). Such beliefs lie at the roots of what we see today as cultural insensitivity and cultural imperialism. The imposition of Western ideas on passive recipients in the colonies was not questioned.

## 7 CONCLUSION

I conclude that the pattern of library development, and specifically the development of public libraries according to the national library service model, derived its inspiration primarily from British protagonists who, influenced by contemporary British thinking on public libraries, adapted the British county and city-wide public library systems with which they were familiar, to what they considered to be African needs. The predominantly British influence was exercised through UNESCO and IFLA, through the British Council, and through the appointment of British librarians to key leadership positions as the British colonies approached independence and in the decade or so that followed, after which they were replaced by local staff trained in the same tradition. Many organizations, institutions and individuals were involved in developing and disseminating the national library service idea. Although the motives of individuals did not necessarily coincide with the objectives of their organizations and institutions, the adoption of the model was facilitated by the converging interests of geopolitical players and idealistic librarians and educators.

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