

AIDS and culture: The case for an African information identity

Kendra S. Albright

The library and information profession in Africa is not well recognised. It does not carry an identifiable set of core activities that share a common understanding across societies in Africa. The number of libraries in Africa is limited for a variety of reasons, including lack of resources, populations that are not based in print literacy, and having its roots in the British model of librarianship. HIV/AIDS continues to pose severe problems for sub-Saharan Africa. Some countries in the region have successfully reduced the number of HIV/AIDS cases, citing information as the main source of prevention, presenting library and information professionals a unique opportunity to collectively organise and establish their role in the fight against the disease. This chapter discusses the opportunity for how library and information science professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities can develop and strengthen a positive status for the library and information discipline in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Author's details

Dr Kendra S. Albright

Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield, Regent Court, 211 Portobello Street,
Sheffield S1 4DP, United Kingdom

☎ + 44 – 114 – 222 2649

✉ k.albright@sheffield.ac.uk

Introduction

Libraries in most industrialised countries provide services that are recognised by the public as contributing to the overall good of society. Public monies are made available to fund, either in whole or in part, the development and maintenance of public libraries. Librarianship is a well-established, recognised profession that carries a common perception of its related services. More recently, librarianship, when joined with information and communication technology (ICT), is transformed into information work and those who participate in this profession are often referred to as information professionals, or a related title. Together, library and information science (LIS) professionals constitute a profession and conduct activities that are widely recognised.

LIS professionals also have an important role to play in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). They provide access to valuable information and knowledge that can contribute to the solution of social problems. According to UNECA (2006), they help to:

... advance knowledge sharing, preservation of local knowledge and content, indigenous languages, content management and development, access to the Internet, and many other information concerns which are indispensable to ensuring the acquisition of knowledge by Africans.

Libraries also provide information to people through the “collection, acquisition and dissemination of books, journals and other materials” (Rosenberg, 2002). The LIS profession in Africa, however, faces challenges to the provision of effective services that are specific to their own sub-Saharan cultures. Barriers from external sources (e.g. a legacy of LIS education that is rooted in the British tradition) and internal limitations (e.g. limited resources, weak management) have restricted the growth and recognised value of the LIS profession in SSA.

There are many fewer libraries per capita in SSA compared with those in industrialised nations. Because societies in SSA are steeped in oral culture, libraries are not perceived as necessary. Librarianship is deemed a low status profession with a poor image (Tsigemelak, 2006; Batambuze, 2005), and remains loosely defined and not clearly recognised (Mchombu, 1991). Tsigemelak (2006:3) adds that because of the apathetic perspective towards libraries in Africa, “African

governments have lost enthusiasm for library service”.

Librarianship evolved from its colonial roots, which became the basis for LIS training and practice in Africa. With additional influence from the US, these Western roots have yielded a profession trained for an elitist print (and now digital/electronic) culture, but operating in one predominantly based in oral tradition. Amadi (1981) asserts that while American libraries exist to meet the needs of Americans, and British libraries exist for the British, African libraries do not offer services that meet the needs of Africans.

Despite these problems, the demand for LIS graduates is increasing (Mambo, 2000). LIS education programmes have proliferated, including those in Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, and since the initial establishment of the East Africa School of Librarianship in Uganda in the early 1960s. Raseroka (1994) reported that LIS training in SSA doubled with the addition of South Africa. The demand appears to be greatest for graduates with bachelor’s degrees, although postgraduate studies are increasingly common (Albright, 2005). For example, Makerere University in Uganda started a doctoral programme with four students in its initial cohort in 2005 (Kigongo-Bukenya, 2005).

There remains, however, no official reporting mechanism for tracking the graduates of these programmes (Ocholla & Bothma, 2006). Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these graduates are working in HIV/AIDS information activities across a variety of settings, including community centres, documentation and telecentres, and non-governmental organisations involved in AIDS information, education and communication (IEC) activities (Albright, 2005). Because information is critical to the fight against HIV/AIDS and is necessary for preventing its spread, LIS professionals are uniquely positioned to meet this need. These professionals who are engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities have the opportunity to develop and strengthen a positive perception of the LIS discipline in SSA.

Status of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 10% of the

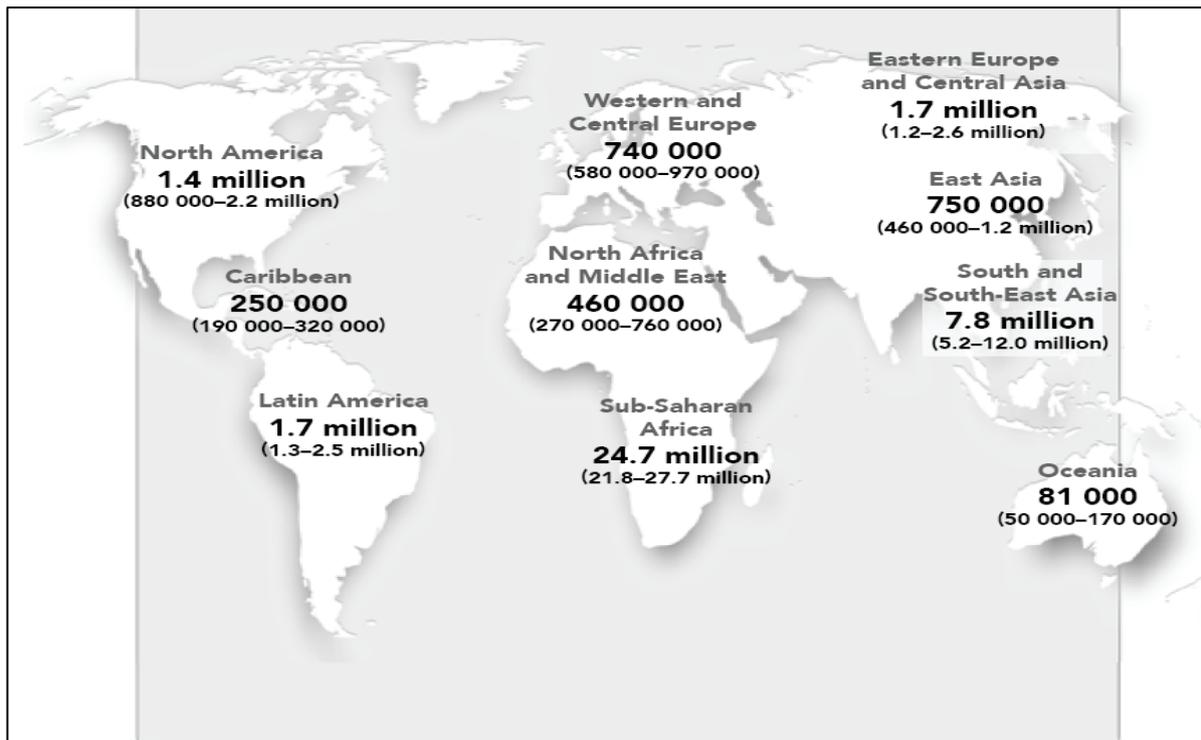


Figure 1: Adults and children estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS; a total of 39.5 (34.1–47.1) million
 Source: UNAIDS/WHO (2006)

world's population, but has over 63% of people living with HIV/AIDS in the world (Figure 1). In 2006, some 72% of the estimated 2.1 million AIDS-related deaths worldwide were in SSA (UNAIDS/WHO, 2006).

Some 87% (330 000) of the 380 000 children who died of AIDS-related causes in 2006 were in SSA. Despite intervention efforts, the numbers of new HIV infections are roughly equivalent to the number of deaths from AIDS each year. However, several countries in Africa have successfully reversed the prevalence of the disease, with IEC cited as the primary means of prevention (Green, 2003). Uganda has been credited with the greatest success in curbing the spread of the disease, and praised for its multisectoral IEC strategy implemented by President Museveni in the early years of the disease (Albright & Kawooya, 2004; 2005).

There is no vaccine or cure for HIV or AIDS. Information is all that we have and is, therefore, critical in efforts targeted at preventing the spread of the virus. Through widespread information about HIV/AIDS, the people of SSA

can gain the knowledge needed to change their behavioural response to the AIDS epidemic. LIS professionals are trained in the collection, organisation, management, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information and have the tools to be particularly instrumental in HIV/AIDS prevention efforts. However, the LIS profession faces barriers to this service that must first be addressed.

Barriers to the LIS profession in sub-Saharan Africa

The problems facing the LIS profession in Africa are many. Problems stem from a combination of social characteristics, including oral tradition, varying rates of print literacy, a limited understanding of the specific information needs of people of SSA societies, and limited resources. At times, the need for libraries seems questionable, at best.

Mchombu (1991) identified the primary problems facing librarianship in Africa, grouping them into two categories: those that are external challenges

for libraries in Africa and those that are internally focused. External challenges are those that are “derived from the hostile social environment within which libraries exist in Africa” (Mchombu, 1991:186). These are the problems that professionals themselves identified as barriers to African librarianship. Internally focused challenges (Mchombu, 1991:188) address those issues that are caused by:

... the structural decoupling of libraries in Africa from their key user target groups, and the development of an inward-looking mentality which tends to glorify internal processes at the expense of maximizing use of library resources.

The combined framework will be used to analyse ways in which LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities can develop and strengthen a positive status for the LIS discipline in SSA. Each of the issues will be examined in light of opportunities for the LIS profession to respond within the context of HIV/AIDS information.

External challenges

A list of external challenges identified by Mchombu (1991) is presented in Table 1. Each of these challenges is addressed below from the

perspective of LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS activities.

African readers have not yet developed a reading habit

Many people in SSA cannot read. It does not, however, mean that they are incompetent or lacking in the ability to understand. Literacy takes many forms and oral tradition is a form of literacy that allows for the rapid transmission of information throughout local communities. LIS professionals in SSA involved in HIV/AIDS information activities are well-positioned to tap into the local community oral network, utilising the existing form of communication in order to spread accurate, relevant and useful information quickly.

LIS professionals can interact and engage with local communities, building trust while furthering the spread of critical information. Concurrently, these professionals can establish reading programmes that are specifically targeted at the needs of the communities they serve, using culturally appropriate techniques to foster reading skills (e.g. reading tents, mobile libraries).

1. African readers have not yet developed a reading habit.
2. Africa's oral culture and authoritarian transmission of knowledge do not favour the development of libraries.
3. Governments and decision makers do not fully support libraries; in particular, they have failed to institute and legislate national information policies.
4. African governments lack the notion of information as an important factor and strategy in the process of national development.
5. Governments in Africa are oversensitive to critical information, hence frequent attempts to block access to certain categories of information.
6. There is a low level of informatisation of the African society, and overall low competence and propensity in incorporating large amounts of innovative information into goods and services being produced.
7. Illiteracy rates are too high to enable people, particularly in rural areas and urban shanty townships, to appreciate the use of libraries.
8. Students read only to pass examinations, after which they stop reading.
9. The book industry has failed to supply sufficient materials in indigenous languages.
10. The economic recession in African countries has made it very difficult for libraries to obtain adequate funding, and often there has been a complete freeze on foreign exchange allocations.

Table 1: External challenges for librarianship in Africa (based on Mchombu, 1991)

Africa's oral culture and authoritarian transmission of knowledge do not favour the development of libraries

Several approaches can be used to address the problem of library development. Instead of assuming a print-based approach to librarianship, the incorporation of oral culture into the practice of LIS work can expand and transform the notion of librarianship into something that is decidedly African. Partnerships can be formed with other institutions to facilitate this transformation. For example, radio and drama are two primary means by which AIDS information is transmitted (Albright et al., 2007). LIS professionals can partner with media (e.g. radio) to develop effective AIDS information campaigns for the local community. LIS professionals can also team up with educational institutions to develop targeted educational programmes for AIDS information. These partnerships can build and expand the professional identity of LIS professionals.

Governments and decision makers do not fully support libraries; in particular, they have failed to institute and legislate national information policies

The LIS profession has a tremendous challenge to establish its professional identity in such a way as to garner support from the government and other societal institutions. Partnerships like those listed above will help to increase the visibility of the profession. In addition, as the role of LIS professionals in the prevention of HIV/AIDS is more highly recognised, these professionals will have increasing opportunities to participate in decisions regarding information policies.

Governments lack the notion of information as an important factor and strategy in the process of national development

The reduction of HIV/AIDS in several of the SSA countries (e.g. Botswana, Senegal, Uganda) has demonstrated the importance of information in creating social change. Similar changes may be possible through the targeted design of information campaigns for issues of national development. LIS professionals have an opportunity to organise their engagement in AIDS information activities collectively and to create more visibility

for the profession. Concurrently, the rise of the profession will increase awareness of the importance of information in national development.

Governments are oversensitive to critical information, hence frequent attempts to block access to certain information

LIS professionals are in a unique position to address freedom of information issues. HIV/AIDS information activities are only one area in which the LIS profession can promote the free flow of information, thus lowering barriers to information access. This is another area where partnerships between LIS professionals and the media (e.g. print and broadcast journalists) can facilitate access to vital information, particularly in the case of HIV/AIDS.

There is a low level of informatisation of the African society, and overall low competence and propensity in incorporating large amounts of innovative information into goods and services being produced

With the record number of graduates from LIS programmes throughout SSA, an increasing number of people are being trained in the use of new technologies, including those that are well-deployed within the region. The idea of informatisation need not be limited to computers; rather, it should be viewed broadly and can include mobile telephony and radio, two very widely adopted technologies in SSA. For example, information can be easily transmitted to mobile telephone users through text messages. LIS professionals can utilise these technologies in the provision of all types of information, including HIV/AIDS. Further, LIS professionals can be deployed as community resources to integrate computers and other technologies into local communities. It must be cautioned, however, that maintenance of new technologies must be supported in order to be effective over time.

Illiteracy rates are too high to enable people, particularly in rural areas and urban shanty townships, to appreciate the use of libraries

The notion of libraries is often applied to Africa

from a limited perspective, as represented by this outdated definition by UNESCO in 1970:

... any organized collection of printed books and periodicals or of any other graphic or audio-visual materials, and the services of a staff to provide and facilitate the use of such materials as are required to meet the informational, research, educational or recreational needs of its users.

The emphasis is on a print and audio-visual collection and does not represent the incorporation of newer digital technologies that are widely used in Western LIS practice. The question is: Can Africa not create its own variation of librarianship by incorporating more appropriate technologies for its own cultures? Again, the inclusion of oral communications (e.g. radio and drama) in the context of African information practice could lead to a greater appreciation for, and use of, libraries. HIV/AIDS information programmes would be a useful starting point for developing an African concept of library.

Students read only to pass examinations, after which they stop reading

The HIV/AIDS information programmes that incorporate oral communications could possibly facilitate increased interest in, and use of, LIS activities. Through increased involvement of the public, LIS professionals can expand programmes to include reading activities. In partnership with educational institutions, reading programmes can be designed to support school-related activities, including examinations. They can also be designed to facilitate the enjoyment of reading. Moreover, partnerships can provide access to additional reading materials through interlending agreements and expanded access to other collections.

The book industry has failed to supply sufficient material in local languages

Western publishers are cautious about publishing African materials and those in indigenous languages because of the limited market for these materials. Furthermore, African authors and organisations often make materials available for local distribution only (Sturges & Neill, 1997). There are also concerns that giving away their indigenous knowledge to publishing companies

in the industrialised countries will not result in economic rewards or incentives for African authors (Kawooya, 2005). There is a substantial amount of HIV/AIDS research in the grey literature of SSA. LIS professionals are trained in the management of grey literature, and should assume some leadership in negotiating the terms and conditions for making this information more widely available.

The economic recession has made it difficult for libraries to obtain adequate funding, and often there has been a complete freeze on foreign exchange allocations

The economic recession in SSA has been compounded by the devastation caused by HIV/AIDS. More than ever, it is necessary for LIS professionals to utilise their skills in targeting information to prevent the spread of the disease. LIS professionals must pursue positions of leadership in HIV/AIDS information activities in order to raise awareness of their professional value and increase their visibility.

Internal challenges

A list of the internally focused challenges identified by Mchombu (1991) is presented in Table 2. These challenges are addressed below from the perspective of LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS activities.

The historical legacy of colonialism and its impact on librarianship

There are a number of issues involved in the impact of colonialism on African librarianship. Reviewing the British model of library training in SSA, Batambuze (2005) suggests that it was geared towards creating a market for British publications in Africa. The outcome since then has been that African academics in LIS science "have failed to come up with an African LIS hybrid. Therefore, the library profession is not perceived as particularly useful, except by those who are already fairly educated". Library responses to this are slowly building towards an identity of an African profession. In particular, the same creative and innovative approach to sources and services is found in HIV/AIDS information activities offered by libraries.

1. The historical legacy of colonialism and its impact on librarianship
2. The belief that information-seeking behaviour of Africans is identical to those of library users in Europe and North America
3. The emphasis on tending to documents rather than users
4. The ability of librarians to incorporate the integration of optimum information into their parent organisation
5. The need to create African materials (i.e. to facilitate an African publishing industry), rather than relying on book donations from the US and Western Europe
6. Matching the information needs of Africans with African materials
7. Weak library management and leadership based, in part, on the poor quality of training in LIS programmes abroad and at home

Table 2: Internally focused challenges for librarianship in Africa (based on Mchombu, 1991)

The belief that information-seeking behaviour of Africans is identical to those of library users in Europe and North America

There has been a fair amount of research on the information-seeking behaviour of Africans. In many cases, there are clear differences in the way that Africans seek information and information seeking in European and North American libraries. For example, Mchombu (1996) conducted a study of information needs in rural Botswana, Malawi and Tanzania in which 50% of the participants did not perceive that they had any information needs. He found that this perception depends on the way in which they were asked about their information needs. They were more likely to articulate their information needs if they were explicitly linked to their reality, to “what was going on around them” (Mchombu, 1996:78). Merely asking them what information they needed was not useful in drawing out their information needs.

The concept of information needs is more explicit to library users in North America and Europe. LIS professionals in SSA who work with HIV/AIDS information often encounter users whose information needs can be more easily articulated. Therefore, this is an excellent area for examining the information-seeking behaviour specific to Africans in particular communities.

The emphasis on tending to documents rather than users

African LIS professionals, being trained primarily in the British tradition, have learnt to focus on

managing the collection rather than placing their emphasis on the users. Libraries, therefore, have a very limited ability to serve the African population. LIS professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities are often in direct contact with individuals who have a specific need for critical information. Professionals are sometimes required to go into the field to serve the information needs of these users, and then find that they must develop creative approaches to meet these needs.

The ability of librarians to incorporate the integration of optimum information into their parent organisation

LIS professionals in SSA, as elsewhere, reflect the mission of their parent organisation. They are responsible for ensuring the acquisition and distribution of relevant materials to the parent body. Those professionals engaged in HIV/AIDS information activities in SSA are uniquely positioned to assume a strong leadership role by identifying and selecting the most relevant materials for their parent organisation.

The need to create African materials (i.e. to facilitate an African publishing Industry), rather than relying on book donations from the US and Western Europe

African materials are needed to represent the specific realities of life in Africa. The political, economic, social and cultural differences need to be reflected in materials developed specifically

for Africa and its independent nations and communities. Materials published elsewhere, whether acquired through purchase or donation, cannot substantially address the particular needs of African societies. Because the number of people living with HIV/AIDS in SSA is so much greater than anywhere else, a large body of indigenous materials is produced on this topic. LIS professionals can facilitate the publication of these materials by prioritising and requesting them for their collections.

Matching the information needs of Africans with African materials

The evidence is clear that there is a need for HIV/AIDS information in SSA. These materials should reflect research and cultural practices in the local communities that will be most likely to prevent the spread of the disease. By examining the specific HIV/AIDS information needs of Africans with materials that are responsive to the specific needs of Africans, there is a greater likelihood of successful prevention than by relying on outside sources.

Weak library management and leadership based, in part, on the poor quality of training in LIS programmes abroad and at home

Problems with LIS management and leadership in SSA are linked to problems that stem from the British model of librarianship (Benge, 1996). African LIS professionals trained under the British model learn to address the information needs of Westerners and how to serve those cultures. What works in Northern Europe, for example, may not work in East Africa. More emphasis should be placed on training African LIS professionals in an African context of LIS practice. The role of information in the prevention of HIV/AIDS is an area that can promote the development of African LIS practice by incorporating the information needs of Africans into an African model of LIS education.

An example is the creation of an AIDS information course module for postgraduate students at the East African School of LIS Science at Makerere University in Uganda. This course seeks to incorporate identifiable information

needs of local communities with reference to culturally appropriate sources and services.

Considerations for sub-Saharan Africa

Several considerations emerge from the activities of LIS professionals involved in HIV/AIDS information dissemination in SSA. These considerations can assist LIS professionals in overcoming the challenges identified above and utilising the characteristics of indigenous culture to facilitate the provision of information through formats that are better suited to African societies (e.g. radio, drama and audiobooks). These include the following:

- The scope of what is included in LIS practice in Africa should be broadened to include information sources outside the role of traditional libraries (e.g. community centres and mobile libraries), including those information activities related to HIV/AIDS. For example, information is commonly shared in community centres, youth centres, documentation centres and multipurpose telecentres. These venues serve as community centres where local forums and meetings can be conducted, both formal and informal.
- LIS practitioners should develop flexible HIV/AIDS programmes designed to meet specific needs of African people. This includes encouraging the development and production of information products and services appropriate to the local community, addressing issues of language, delivery and publishing. Materials should be designed specifically for a target audience. Because of the oral tradition, non-print materials should be widely used in conjunction with reading programmes.
- Partnerships should be established between libraries and other sources of HIV/AIDS information activities (e.g. educational institutions, the media). The value of HIV/AIDS information in prevention efforts is well recognised, and is increasingly at the core of policy and funding practices. LIS professionals should be involved in decision making and policy setting regarding information practices related to HIV/AIDS. By partnering with other institutions, LIS professionals raise their visibility and potential role for affecting policy.
- The LIS education curriculum in SSA should be reviewed. The incorporation of HIV/AIDS

information activities would be useful to raise public awareness and increase the visibility of the profession. Course work should include the characteristics of local culture, particularly oral tradition, and the information needs of local communities. Training should also address how to work in partnership with other organisations. Additionally, specialised training, possibly certification, in the unique HIV/AIDS information could be offered.

- LIS educational programmes should track the professional activities of their graduates, including where they find work, the types of organisations that employ their graduates, and so on. This will provide the necessary metrics to present an organised picture of the LIS profession throughout the region.
- Library associations in SSA should develop a position statement regarding the profession's role in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Related projects should be developed and evaluated, and the results should be widely publicised.

The combination of these activities will help to build the professional identity of the African LIS profession. LIS professionals working in HIV/AIDS information activities have an opportunity to lead the development of this identity.

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