GENERAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Book review

SCECSAL 2002: From Africa to the world – the globalisation of indigenous knowledge systems
Proceedings of the 15th Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library and Information Associations, 15-19 April 2002, Caesars Gauteng Conference Centre, South Africa. Edited by Retha Snyman. Pretoria: Library and Information Association of South Africa, 2002. 342p. ISBN 0 620 28876 0.

The publication of these conference papers was made possible by the support of the IFLA Advancement of Libraries Programme, ALP. It is interesting to note that the copyright of the papers is vested in the authors, not LIASA or SCECSAL, and the author's professional affiliation and email address are given for each paper.

The volume contains 25 papers, arranged in programme presentation order, representing input from Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho, Nigeria, Uganda, Finland, Kenya, Malawi, Swaziland, Zambia and Australia. As might be expected, since this was the first time SCECSAL had been hosted by South Africa since its inception in 1972, nearly half of the presenters were from South Africa.

In his foreword, Robert Moropa, the chair of the SCECSAL 2002 Organising Committee, states that the theme of the conference, "From Africa to the world - globalisation of indigenous knowledge systems", strives to answer the question, "Does Africa have something valuable that it can offer or share with the world apart from its mineral resources and its hospitality?" He suggests that "in the haste to embrace Western knowledge systems Africans have failed to recognise the value of their own indigenous knowledge systems."

SCECSAL 2002 "is the response and contribution of the library and information community in South Africa and the SCECSAL region to the call for the African Renaissance, and to other initiatives to rebuild Africa". The foundations of the conference theme were laid by the Gauteng Northern Province (now Limpopo) branch of LIASA in a "miniconference" on indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in June 2001.

The papers published in the proceedings were selected in the expectation that they would "restore the balance between the complementary knowledge systems of the West and Africa". They covered sub-themes that include the definition and management of indigenous knowledge systems, and ways of making these available locally and globally, including Internet access to indigenous knowledge (IK).

In her Keynote paper, Kay Raseroka of the University of Botswana (and President-elect of IFLA) defines IK as local knowledge, unique to a given culture, society or community, comprising know-how and cultural practices that are owned by oral tradition-based communities, and transmitted orally between generations. Thus they are set out in contrast to modern knowledge systems generated and documented within the international system of universities, research institutes and private firms.

The tension generated by this contrast is evident in many of the papers, and gives rise to concerns about the sharing of esoteric secrets and traditional knowledge; the benefits to be derived from these; protection by copyright and patents, especially in the case of natural products perceived as having commercial value to the health products industry, and anxiety over exploitation of people and IK. Raseroka suggests that African librarians have yet to act decisively on the preservation of oral tradition and IKS.

The papers repeatedly pick up some or all of these themes and examine them in relation to practice in African countries and institutions. Management of IK and IKS is addressed in a number of papers, as are information technology, ICT and IKS issues. Chisenga suggests that repackaging and providing access to IKS, using the World Wide Web, contributes to the contents of the web and ensures that information consumers in Africa will have access to the information produced by the continent. Mutula and Omolo are both concerned with the continued existence of the digital divide that results in the absence of online content about IK and Africa.

Different aspects of IK in the SCECSAL region are presented in case studies by Weideman, Makenzi, Meyer, Serema, Phiri, Onyango, Lekau and Nkatha. Addressing the issue of globalising and indigenising the library and information curriculum, Isaac Kigongo-Bukenya presented an interesting comparative study of IK-related courses in selected instittions and suggests that "indigenisation and globalisation are twins and need equal treatment".

In another section of the programme, the position of the information sector in representing IKS is examined. Hechter describes how the publishing industry was attacked at the 2001 IKS conference for only representing a minority of South

Africa's people, and her paper is a defence of the intrinsic value of publishing in IKS. She suggests that the challenge facing publishers and the IK community jointly is promoting the importance of books for sustaining IK and fostering a reading culture where reading and buying books has not been part of the life of the community. Inclusion of IK in the school curriculum would bring IK into textbooks and thus into the domain of publishing.

Mumba examines the role of the information professional and information in African society and warns that the special nature of IK demands innovative methods of collection and dissemination, and particular care is required to ensure that the originators of the knowledge enjoy the final product. She believes that "the 'development licence' will have been carried too far should all this opening up of Africa's hidden knowledge turn out to have non-Africans as the major recipients. Some benefit must accrue to the people of Africa for having this unlocked."

The final paper in this collection is by an Australian, Alan Bundy, who argues that the information literacy divide rather than the digital divide, is the critical issue of the information age. In support of this he presents details of the multicultural New Zealand model of information literacy-led national information policy in which "three 'Ks'" are identified: knowledge access, knowledge content and knowledge equity. These are intended to mirror the indigenous Maori belief in three baskets of knowledge.

This illustration of the integration of a non-African IKS and a fundamentally Western knowledge-based national information policy provides a positive conclusion for a unique collection of papers on indigenous knowledge systems. It would be a major indigenous African contribution to the professional literature in Africa and internationally if these proceedings could be made available in full-text format on the Internet in the not too distant future.

There are unfortunately a few shortcomings in the ease of use of the proceedings. There is neither an alphabetical list of authors nor any biographical notes, which is regrettable. Nor is any contact information or affiliation given for the editor, Retha Snyman, or for Barbara Kellerman and Mary Nassimbeni, the other members of the Programme Committee, who presumably were responsible for selecting these papers.

The list of contents does not include the Foreword (pp. vii-viii) by Robert Moropa, who sets the conference in its "African Renaissance" context, quoting South African President Thabo Mbeki. Also not listed in the Contents is a two-page list of acronyms and abbreviations (pp. v-vi), derived from the text of the papers. Some of these are international and regional abbreviations, while others are local or simply idiosyncratic, and are given no explanatory context or source. These include DACST (the South African Government Department of Arts Culture Science and Technology, which only South African readers may know) and LARIS (Department of Library, Archival and Information Studies - of which institution?); others, such as FLE ("family-life education"), CGP ("career guidance practitioner"), IP ("information professional") and LISP ("library and information science professional") should simply have been expanded in their individual contexts, and not listed in front of the proceedings.

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