LIBRARIES AND DEMOCRACY: A METAPHORICAL EXPLORATION

1. INTRODUCTION: METAPHORS IN THE LIBRARY

Metaphor has long resided in the library: there has been a considerable history of libraries both being represented metaphorically and being utilised as a metaphor (Walsh, 1987:212). Radford and Radford put forward that there is a strong tradition in Western literature to use the library as a metaphor for order and rationality (1997:254), while there have been numerous studies on the ways in which librarians have employed varied metaphors to represent the range of roles libraries can play in different organisations (Chu, 2000:274). From expressions of library as ‘museum’ to ‘mirror of the universe’ (Nitecki, 1979:25), ‘map of knowledge’ to ‘world brain’ (Hjorland, 2006), the public library as the ‘people’s university’ (Nardini, 2001), there is a plethora of complementary and contrary metaphorical concepts battling for space in the library.

Traditionally, metaphors have often been dismissed as insubstantial literary flourishes. In recent years, however, modern linguistic theorists, on the basis of the findings of empirical studies, have increasingly come to assert that metaphor is central to abstract thought and, as such, fundamental to humankind’s ability to make sense of the world (Hamilton, 2000:240). Lakoff and Johnson offer a succinct definition of the current conception of metaphor: ‘Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding’ (1980:36). So, a metaphor is the application of one concept to a different conceptual domain, the linking of a less familiar idea to a more familiar idea, to reveal something new or unexpected. Given the centrality of metaphor to our ongoing sense-making processes, it could be argued that metaphors can reflect changing conscious and subconscious perceptions of the world. Furthermore, this sense-making process operates at both an individual and a collective level, drawing on environment and embedded cultural norms, thus at times resulting in metaphors specific to a certain culture at a particular period in history (Inns, 2002:324).

Nitecki, in putting forward a metaphorical hypothesis of librarianship, asserts that metaphor can be used to ‘discovering new meaning by stimulating interest in a unique relationship. This approach opens up new possibilities for further analytical investigations’ (1979:28). Certainly it has been suggested that metaphor has been employed to propose change or ‘to influence how persons within and outside of the field thought about libraries’ (Nardini, 2001). Within the library community, there is historical evidence of metaphor being employed self-consciously as a mechanism to question, review and revise the image and direction of the profession. In Nardini’s systematic and comprehensive review of library metaphors employed within articles featured in Library Journal and Public Libraries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he asserts that not only did metaphor ‘become a way to disagree about libraries’ within the professional ranks, it also could be used tactically to encourage recruitment or to communicate using vocabulary understandable to outsiders, such as philanthropists or politicians, in a position to fund library development (Nardini, 2001). Thus this
constant quest to revision the library through comparison to other schemas could be considered to be an ongoing attempt to redefine the profession, overturn assumptions, open up new possibilities and direction and manage change in a less threatening manner within the profession in times of uncertainty.

And what, if anything, can metaphor reveal about the ways the library is perceived by outsiders? Akin and Palmer make the distinction between etic and emic contexts for the use of metaphors as change agents, with the etic approach representing metaphors expressing the view of an outsider, emic the view of the insider (2000:68-9). Because etic and emic metaphors can denote different points of view of the same organisation or situation, in this case the library, a study aiming to compare and contrast the use of etic metaphors (within fiction or other paradigms) and emic metaphors (within LIS literature) may reveal those gaps that exist between the way in which the LIS profession perceives itself and how outsiders perceive the library.

Now what, you may ask, does this all have to do with democracy? Within the LIS literature, there are numerous examples of the metaphorical concept, LIBRARY AS DEMOCRACY and related expressions, being employed to reflect the role libraries and librarians purport to play in promoting and supporting democracy. However, if one steps outside the library realm, one encounters a multitude of metaphorical representations of the library that seem to contest or draw into question this idea of the library as an inherently democratic institution. Therefore, there seems some value in identifying and interrogating both emic metaphors from within the library profession and external or etic metaphors to ascertain the extent to which libraries have actually been perceived as democratic institutions by outsiders so as to inform strategies for developing libraries to promote and safeguard democracy into the future.

As a starting point, I will briefly consider the concept LIBRARY AS DEMOCRACY and related metaphorical expressions of democratic ideas drawn from the LIS profession before turning to representations of libraries in popular culture that speak to the ways in which libraries have been perceived externally to support or undermine democracy. I will then consider library metaphors specific to democracy in the African context and will conclude by attempting to identify some common themes to inform the ongoing and correlated development and promotion of libraries and democracy.

As a brief disclaimer, I would like to acknowledge some gaping holes in this paper in the form of absent library metaphors – metaphors of education, medicine and industry, of geography, exploration and the search in the library that may be familiar to many LIS professionals. There are certainly elements of these metaphors that would add richness to a discussion of libraries and democracy but time and space is limited so this is simply exploratory, a sampling to provide a starting point for further discussions. I would also like to draw attention to the fact that I have, for this paper, conflated libraries, archives and other public information services under the umbrella term ‘library’ as they face many of the same challenges and opportunities within the context of promoting and defending democracy, and as such, could work in partnership, where possible, to this end.
2. METAPHORS OF DEMOCRACY FROM THE LIS LITERATURE

Nancy Kranich, past president of the American Library Association, has repeatedly asserted in recent years that libraries are the ‘cornerstones of democracy’ (2001: 5) while Rachel More has used the expression ‘librarians as agents for democracy’ to encourage South African librarians to participate in reorganizing, realigning and reshaping libraries to preserve and deepen our fledgling democracy (2004). The idea of the library as a vital partner in the promotion and protection of democratic values is certainly not new to the LIS profession, particularly in the USA. According to Battles, ‘one of the mottoes of the public library movement that swept Western Europe and America in the nineteenth century went like this: “a book for every person”’ (2003:121), a slogan recalling the central premise of democracy, a vote for every person. Berry cites the original mission of the Boston Public Library, written in 1852 as an early example of this role of the public library: ‘to inform democracy...to provide the information to ensure that citizens in our democracy could make well-informed decisions on issues on the public agenda’ (2006:10). Berry goes on to express his concern that contemporary public libraries have largely failed to live up to this mission statement and urges the profession to remember the vital role the profession has to play in ‘informing democracy ... especially in this era of spin and misinformation’ (Berry, 2006:10). Michael Baldwin concurs, asserting that, within the USA, ‘librarians have never fully heeded the call to exercise their institutions’ inherent and highest function as bulwarks of democracy. We must now recognize that we are part of the problem of a degenerate democracy that is in imminent danger of slipping into some bitter flavor of authoritarianism’ (Baldwin, 2002)

Others do not share this concern, presenting the library’s contribution to the advancement of democracy, or even the embodiment thereof, as a fait accompli. Levin, in an article entitled ‘The public library as great equalizer’; argues that public libraries may be ‘one of the few truly public community venues left in the United States and one ideally suited for "the pursuit of happiness" that Thomas Jefferson envisioned when he, fashioned this phrase for the Declaration of Independence. An opportunity to convene community is part and parcel of the country's claim of providing equality as a right' (Levin, 2000). Tyckosan claims that the ‘three basic elements of democracy – that power is derived from the people, that the majority rules, and that rights of the individuals and the principles of social equality should be respected – are part of daily practice in the public library, which is often the single most democratic institution in the community’ (2000:40).

In their discussion of Library 2.0 (the application of participatory Web 2.0 technologies to the library context), Chad and Miller set in opposition the vocabulary of the fortress with that of democracy to represent the movement away from controlled, inaccessible library systems to a more collaborative, participatory approach:

Libraries should be at the heart of the “democratisation of information" - helping to bring down the walls that surround it and enabling greater participation. A major step forward, and a foundation upon which to build, is to bring down the walls around our own systems and our own information (2005:10).

While the message of such articles is inspirational (and aspirational), this complacency is misplaced given the history of the library as a tool for oppression – in the past, Shera noted, the library has often served the
interests of monarchic, church, and civil agencies, as a ‘handmaiden for power and authority’, rather than those of the ‘common man’ (cited in Nitecki, J., 1993). Librarians colluded with the Nazis, through censoring collections to reflect the values of the Third Reich (Battles, 2003:172-3). Even within the context of modern democracy, Battles names the exclusion of African Americans from public libraries even in the 20th century as an example of libraries preventing people deemed ‘unsuited to be readers’ from accessing books (Battles, 2003:180-3). Similarly Goldstein observes, in a study of the history of public libraries in Iowa from 1890 to 1940, that:

> [a]t the turn of the century the ideal librarian has been a censor and guide who warded off the threat of disorder and change by acquiring only the best books in her library and by directing her patrons to read those works that were best for them (2003:231).

So the library's role as well-intentioned censor working as a panacea for the problems of society also seems to have been largely overlooked in the evocation of the library as long-time promoter of democratic values.

### 2.1 Library as sanctuary

Librarians also employ the related metaphorical concept of the LIBRARY AS SANCTUARY to represent the idea of intellectual freedom: in an American Libraries column entitled ‘Sanctuary in libraries’, David Isaacson asserts that ‘free libraries have always offered intellectual sanctuary to their users’ (2004:27). Richard Ford concurs, arguing that libraries both represent and protect freedom by accommodating and preserving diverse, contrary and subversive information: ‘The library contains these volatile opposites, holds them, gives them institutional sanction, a safe place, and in doing so cushions them, lets us as a culture hold them safely in our minds as ideas, and of course invites us to decide for ourselves (1995:40). Nancy Kranich evokes the idea of sanctuary in arguing that ‘libraries are for everyone, everywhere. They provide safe spaces for public dialogue…libraries ensure the freedom to read, to view, to speak, and to participate’ (2000:5). Idealistic and often reverential in tone, these assertions about the role libraries play in protecting intellectual freedom and democratic values seem to ignore the history of libraries as tools for censorship or even oppression, or the ways in which the sanctuary of the library can be threatened by contemporary legislation undermining rights to privacy such as the Patriot Act in the USA. However, the idea of the library as a sanctuary in which freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom from censorship are protected is significant as a metaphorical concept to which the profession should aspire.

### 2.2 Library as conversation

Another metaphorical representation that seems to embody the principle of public dialogue and deliberation central to democracy is that of LIBRARY AS CONVERSATION. Kennedy, in a consideration of possible metaphors to represent the academic library of the future, suggests this metaphor to express the way in which the library facilitates the communication of ideas, or conversational exchanges over time (2002). Bechtel presents the idea of conversation as a ‘new paradigm for librarianship’, arguing that libraries should be viewed as ‘centers for conversation and of [librarians] as mediators of and participants in the conversation of the world’ (1986:219). McMillen and Hill echo this sentiment as they present the aptness of using the
metaphor of conversation to teach research skills within an academic library: ‘Libraries historically have been charged with preserving critical conversations of the past (records preservation) and, in that role, with ensuring others’ ability to build upon and continue those conversations’ (McMillen & Hill, 2005:14).

2.3 Library as commons
A new metaphorical concept suggesting democratic values has emerged in recent years in the LIS literature, that of LIBRARY AS COMMONS. This metaphor draws on the notion of the commons in English history, that is, communal land that could be used freely to pasture animals and grow food from the 16th to the 19th century (Kranich, 2004:10). The term ‘commons’ has subsequently been employed in a variety of ways, to express the idea of a ‘realm that no one can control, that everyone, no matter what his or her status, can lay equal claim to’ (Johnson, 1999:5).

Commons represents universal rather than limited access, with less emphasis on ownership and control than on use and diversity (Boone, 2003:361). However, as Bollier explains, the commons should not ‘be confused with an open-access regime – a free-for-all in which a resource is essentially open to everyone without restriction … a real commons has a “social infrastructure” of cultural institutions, rules, and traditions and the resources are restricted to personal (non-market) use by the members of the community’ (Bollier, 2002).

Many academic libraries have used the labels learning commons, communication commons, information commons and knowledge commons to represent the space in which a range of new technologies can be utilised within the library alongside access to print resources and the support of library staff.

Libraries are quintessential examples of institutional information commons. They embrace, embody, and practice the democratic values that characterize commons. Their mission is to provide communities with open, equitable, sustained access to ideas, and they offer individuals the tools, skills, and spaces necessary to participate in democratic discourse (Kranich, 2004).

An inspiring image certainly offered up to the profession, by the profession. But how does it match up with external perceptions of the library?
3. LIBRARY METAPHORS FROM POPULAR CULTURE

It has been suggested that the appearance of libraries in literature, while frequent, is no more significant than the use of a stale stereotype intended to signpost intrigue. According to Battles, ‘the library is such an evocative setting that it has become a cliché: what would a gothic mystery be without a gloomy library?’ (2003:17). But Walsh claims that literary representations of the library comprise some of ‘most stimulating, thought-provoking, and controversial criticism written’ (1987:212), an assertion supported by Garrett’s comprehensive reading of Umberto Eco’s *The name of the rose* as ‘library criticism’, with its ‘vast and intricate library dystopia’, ‘librarian as archvillain’ and the use of a library book as this villain’s principal murder weapon, as deliberate criticism of, and warning to, the library profession (1991:373). While most literary portrayals of libraries and librarians do not match Eco’s in terms of dark menace (or erudition, for that matter), there certainly does seem to be a predominance of unflattering representations of libraries evident across a number of genres and forms.

In a survey of the depictions of librarians (and, by extension, libraries) in comic books and graphic novels, Doug Highsmith uncovers themes of fear, punishment and death associated with the library. In amongst examples of the fairly predictable stereotype of the ‘introverted, mousy, shush-ing librarian’ (2002:82), library policemen work in libraries with prison cells where disobedient library users Ren and Stimpy are sentenced to ‘20 years’ hard labour, starting with the installation of [a] new library automation system’ (2002:68), Batman apprehends a murderous librarian who classifies his victims using DDC call numbers in ‘The library of souls’ (2002:65) and Spiderman consults a ‘unattractive…arrogant and rude’ librarian working in “the morgue”, that is, the city library (2002:68).

Radford and Radford, in an analysis of the appearance of libraries in modern popular culture, focus more closely on the underlying issues of power evident in these motifs, using Foucault’s discourse of fear to interrogate representations of libraries and librarians in fiction. Their conclusion that ‘[l]ibraries are understood through metaphors of control, tombs, labyrinths, morgues, dust, ghosts, silence, and humiliation’ (2001) within literature presents a clear challenge to the LIS profession to consider the appropriateness of these negative stereotypes within the context of democracy. To this end, I would like to consider three metaphorical representations of the library recurrent in popular culture that present challenges to the assumption that libraries are inherently democratic by design:

- The library as fortress or prison
- The library as censor
- The library as policeman

3.1 Library as fortress, library as prison

The library defends itself, immeasurable in the truth it houses, deceitful as the falsehood it preserves (Eco, 1983:38).
The custodial function of the library is certainly familiar to many, but in the fictional realm, it is sometimes ambivalent, often negative connotations of this function, that are brought to life through images of fortresses, prisons and labyrinths to explore the ways in which the library – guardian, protector, warden - is perceived to limit access to information.

Tellingly, the library in Eco’s *The name of the rose* is actually contained within a fortress and ‘protected by an imposing bolted metal door’ (Tancheva, 2005, 534). Of course, the labyrinthine design of the library, guarded by disorientating mirrors and mysterious intoxicants, is self-protective. The librarian alone is responsible for navigating the maze, controlling access to library materials, for deciding whether the library user is fit to handle the text requested:

The other monks … may know the list of the volumes that the library houses. But a list of titles often tells very little: only the librarian knows, from the collection of the volume, from its degrees of inaccessibility, what secrets, what truths or falsehoods, that volume contains. Only he decides how, when, and whether to give it to the monk who requests it … Because not all truths are for all ears, not all falsehoods can be recognized as such by a pious soul (Eco, 1983:36).

3.2 Library as censor

…also," the Erad was saying in his gloomy, sententious Erad voice, “we are concerned as to the matter of public safety. It is an axiom of this Library that public safety ranks foremost in value; our eradication of dangerous, disturbing written material… (Dick, 1967:47).

The notion of the library keeping society safe and sound through ensuring that dangerous, inflammatory, or immoral ideas are not made available to the masses is hardly new. However, this ‘mission’ is often treated with mistrust in fictional representations of the library. The idea of the fortress-library, protecting or imprisoning information, is extended to present the LIBRARY AS CENSOR, responsible for the alteration or eradication of information deemed inappropriate for consultation, incompatible with the order of the day.

In Philip K. Dick’s *Counter clock world*, a world in which time is currently moving in reverse, the Library is an enigmatic government agency that purports to stand for ‘the maintenance of the physical and spiritual institutions of present-day society’ through controlling the ‘unwriting’ of history: ‘Our job here at the Library," Appleford said, "is not to study and/or memorize data; it is to expunge it’ (Dick, 1967:17). This representation of the LIBRARY AS CENSOR can be interpreted as a criticism of the ways in which governments, often supported by libraries, can withhold or amend history, or access to information, in order to ensure control of its citizens.

In Borges’ ‘Library of Babel’, some librarians take it upon themselves to judge the merit of works within the library, to condemn superfluous texts:
Other men inversely thought that the primary task was to eliminate useless works. They would invade the hexagons, exhibiting credentials which were not always false, skim through a volume with annoyance, and then condemn entire bookshelves to destruction: their ascetic, hygienic fury is responsible for the senseless loss of millions of books (Borges, in Cart, 2002:260).

Thus the library is purportedly protecting society from ideas too difficult or dangerous to handle, from information overload. Thus, the notion of the LIBRARY AS CENSOR explicitly represents questions about freedom of speech and the sanctity of the human record.

3.3 Library as policeman, library as spy

Radford and Radford in their study on the discourse of fear within the library discuss the intimidating ‘element of surveillance’ implicit in the functions of the library (2001).

In a novella entitled ‘The library policeman’, Stephen King creates a library populated by fearsome librarians who ‘with one glance…could penetrate the heart of the person speaking to him, and read the secret thoughts’ and the library policemen, ‘the faceless enforcers who would actually come to your house if you didn't bring your overdue books back’ (cited in Radford and Radford, 2001). Radford and Radford argue that this level of fear-inducing surveillance of library users evident in King’s novella and other popular culture artifacts highlights the tension between order and disorder that exists in the library, ‘the ultimate and exaggerated manifestation of the fear and consequences of a user bringing disorder to the otherwise complete and perfectly shelved collection’ (2001).

In QL 696. C9, a short murder mystery by Anthony Boucher in which a librarian on the trail of foreign secret agents using library books to exchange messages is killed, the idea of library circulation records being scrutinized to uncover secrets is explored:

Of course she’d have the FBI’s number. Professional necessity…Some librarians have been advancing the theory, you see, that a librarian can best help defense work by watching what people use which books. For instance, if somebody keeps borrowing every work you have on high explosives, you know he’s a dangerous saboteur planning to blow up the aqueduct and you hand him over to the G-men (Boucher, in Cart, 2002:159).

This notion of the librarian as the responsible spy evokes the ‘intrusive gaze’ of the librarian and the history of libraries operating ‘a strict regime of indirect, documentary surveillance’ (Black, 2005:425). Such suggestions of the censorious role the library can play - well-intentioned with a firm belief in the value of their work to society, yet representing a dangerous infringement on personal liberty – has been opposed in recent years by librarians campaigning against government access to library records under such legislation as the USA Patriot Act of 2001.
3.4 Library as memory

In contrast to these negative portrayals of the library, the idea of the library serving as the memory for humankind is a recurrent theme in literature, particularly science fiction, and is one that speaks to the relationship between libraries, power and the politicized representation of history. In Ray Bradbury’s dystopian *Fahrenheit 451*, the government has ordered that all books be burned requiring that the brain becomes the ultimate library as rebels memorise favorite texts so that they would not be lost (Gunn, n.d.). Montag, the protagonist who rejects his life as a fireman responsible for burning books to join a community of rebels, each dedicating their lives to preserve textual knowledge by memorising one key text, describes the resistance as follows:

Somewhere the saving and the putting away had to begin again and someone had to do the saving and the keeping, one way or another, in books, in people’s heads, any way at all so long as it was safe, free from moths, silverfish, rust and dry-rot, and men with matches (Bradbury, 1979:125).

The library’s function as preserver is similarly represented in Walter M. Miller’s deeply pessimistic *A canticle for Leibowitz*, set in a world in which all books and papers have been destroyed by people living in a world devastated by nuclear war in an attempt to prevent a repeat of this catastrophe. In the centuries that follow this ‘Great Simplification’, a few monks of the Order of St Leibowitz dedicate their lives to maintaining a secret library, the Memorabilia, in order to:

...preserve human history for the great-great-great-grandchildren of the simpletons who wanted it destroyed … Its members were either ‘bootleggers’ or ‘memorizers’, according to the tasks assigned. The bootleggers smuggled books to the southwest desert and buried them there in kegs. The memorizers committed to rote memory entire volumes of history, sacred writings, literature, and science, in case some unfortunate book smuggler was caught, tortured, and forced to reveal the location of the kegs (Miller, cited in Griffen, 1987:140).

A common element of the LIBRARY AS MEMORY metaphorical concept, the brain as library, recurs in such dystopian portrayals of human evolution, often in the context of what Spencer calls the ‘post-apocalyptic library’ where humankind has somehow returned to a pre-literate society in which memory and storytelling are the mechanisms for preserving and communicating human history and knowledge. A persistent theme in the portrayal of libraries and books in fictional visions of the future is the oppression of society through government control of access to all textual records of humankind’s history. In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the government has outlawed books and all libraries and museums closed in a ‘Campaign against the Past’, while secretly the government has hoarded the great books of the past (Pennavaria, 2002:233-4).

Of course, the notion of the LIBRARY AS MEMORY is not located in science fiction alone. In David Lodge’s *The British Museum is falling down*, the idea of the library serving as the brain, the memory of human civilization is explicitly expressed by the central character as he describes the British Museum Library:
It was like a diagram of something - a brain or a nervous system, and the foreshortened people moving about in irregular clusters were like blood corpuscles or molecules. This huge domed Reading Room was the cortex of the English-speaking races, he thought, with a certain awe. The memory of everything they had thought or imagined was stored here (Lodge, 1983:92-93).

Given the status of the British Museum Library as the national deposit library of Great Britain, responsible for ensuring that all publications produced within the country are preserved, this representation is surely unsurprising. It does however point to the historical privileging of one recorded version of history (in this case, English) over others that have not been preserved. This draws into question the reliability of the history libraries and archives help to write through the process of selecting some voices, narratives, versions (often that of the victor) for preservation over others.
4. LIBRARY METAPHORS FROM THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

In this brief reading of certain fictional representations of libraries, perceptions of the library’s complicity in limiting access to information, privileging monolithic versions of history to serve the powerful, and encroaching on personal liberty sit in stark contrast with the profession’s self-professed commitment to democratic values, as embodied in metaphors identified earlier. How do these two sets of largely opposed metaphors, primarily derived from Western popular culture and professional literature compare and contrast with metaphorical representations of the library in Africa? If metaphorical concepts are not necessarily culturally transferable, and Western library models are increasingly considered to be inappropriate for Africa, what can metaphor from the African library profession reveal about the specific challenges facing the library in forwarding democracy on the continent?

4.1 Metaphors of colonisation, imperialism and oppression

In his polemical 1981 work *African libraries: Western tradition and colonial brainwashing*, Amadi makes use of the vocabulary of power and oppression to argue that the original development of libraries in Africa, largely by colonial forces, has resulted in information services in which foreign print-based information sources expressing the Western world view are central, thus suppressing indigenous oral-based knowledge sources: ‘Library colonialism or the domination of Africans by Western nations through the use of information power remains one of the most hidden but deadly instruments of neo-colonialism’ (Amadi, 1981:164). The following year, Kagan also used the label ‘library colonisation’ to describe the development and use of libraries by European colonial forces in Africa as part of a broader promotion of European cultures and languages (Kagan, 1982:17). Given this history of using the library as a mouthpiece for colonial propaganda, it comes as no surprise that the library is sometimes considered to be untrustworthy. In the context of oppressive apartheid South Africa, there was ‘widespread distrust of the written word’ largely because counter-revolutionary misinformation was distributed by the government in print form’ (Sturges & Neill, 1998:134). More recently, Durrani (2006) has employed the terms ‘information liberation’, ‘African activist’ and the idea of a “liberating the mind” / “kuvunja minyororo” (literally, to break the chains) partnerships to express his ideas about how African librarianship should politicise information services, rather than follow ‘blindly the “Western” model of public library services which actively seeks to remove politics from information theories and practices’ (2006:58-61).

Alongside these political metaphors appear numerous examples of metaphors revolving largely around the vocabulary of struggles for survival – poverty, hunger and health. These highlight social and economic inequalities in such expressions as ‘information rich’ and ‘information poor’, first suggested by Childers within the context of community information provision in America (Alema, 1995:40), but now ubiquitous in commentary on African libraries. This dichotomy between the ‘information rich’ and the ‘information poor’ is usually discussed neatly in terms of the wealthy developed world in contrast with the impoverished developing world.

Within the context of widespread poverty across a largely agrarian continent, it is unsurprising to encounter descriptions of African librarianship that employ the vocabulary of nourishment as a source for metaphorical...
concepts, evident in such common place expressions as ‘thirst for knowledge’, ‘information hunger’, information starved’ and ‘book famine’. In the title of their conference paper ‘From food silos to community kitchens – retooling African libraries’ (2006), Du Plessis, Britz and Lor pair the idea of access to food with access to information.

This trope is not only employed to express the basic lack of quantifiable information sources in Africa. Sturges and Neill maintain that the lack of information sources suggested by the expressions of ‘food shortages’ is not only a result of the poverty evident throughout much of Africa, but also refers to the ‘propensity of African governments to suppress information’. (1998:6), that is, withhold food. In his keynote address at SCECSAL 2006, Mchombu uses the image of withheld crops when he talked of ‘silos for hoarding knowledge’, echoing the image of the fortress historically employed to describe libraries in the West (2006:24).

4.2 Metaphors of conversation and community

Central to most calls of the need for a different paradigm to shape the development of appropriate and inclusive information services in Africa is the tradition of oral literacy across the continent. The oral tradition in African society revolves around the exchange of information through the spoken word in a number of settings, with people in the community being the primary source of information. This is expressed in the metaphorical concept of the ‘library as a person’, articulated by Amadi as follows:

> the devastation of a library by fire or similar causes in the Western world is only comparable in intensity to the loss, through death, of an old man in Africa. The latter, like the former, is the veritable embodiment of an archive of a proto-library – a library without shelves (Amadi, 1981:140).

This idea of the human library echoes the LIBRARY AS MEMORY metaphor, discussed previously and is also evident in Benge’s reference to the information dissemination functions of the village poets or griots in pre-colonial Africa (1996:171). It is through ‘human repositories’ that the historical, environmental, spiritual, agricultural and medical knowledge of a community is passed from generation to generation, particularly in rural communities (Alema, 1995:42).

This is counterintuitive to the print-based culture of the West, in which books and other written artifacts are used to acquire new information, usually through silent, solitary study. It is therefore unsurprising that the binary opposites ‘silence / noise’ should feature within library metaphors in Africa. Durrani, drawing on his extensive experience in libraries in Kenya, uses the traditional ‘Silence in the library’ regulation to challenge African librarianship to stop denying, and start addressing, the disconnect between current library provision and community information needs (2006:41-2). Du Plessis, Britz and Lor concur, arguing that ‘the library in Africa…has to give way to noise’, discarding the legacy of the silent ‘cathedral’ and replacing it with the vocal ‘bazaar’ model for the exchange of knowledge (2006:524). Sturges and Neill chose to call their
comprehensive work on African libraries *The quiet struggle* (1998), in part to express the lack of ‘noise’ surrounding the problems of information access across the continent (1998:2).

4.3 **Metaphors of pollution**

This imposition of information foreign to the African context is also reflected in metaphors of pollution, rife in discussions about the value of book donation programmes and their ‘gifts’ of information sources inappropriate to the information needs of most people in Africa in terms of form, content, language and relevance. It has been argued that these ‘generous donations’ often comprising unwanted or surplus discards have actually damaged the information landscape of Africa (Rosi, 2005:17). Weber argues that the ‘lack of books in developing countries does not justify massive dumping of unused books’ (Weber, 2006:5). Curry asserts that ‘donor countries need to shift from facilitating the dumping of unwanted materials, such as surplus print runs, to supporting indigenous publishing’ (Curry, 2002).

Obadiah Moyo points out that ‘[m]ost rural communities have become dumping grounds for any rubbish which occupies space in urban centres. It is sad to note that this rubbish also includes some reading materials which are useless to the lives of rural citizens’ (cited in Sturges & Neill, 1998:98). Arguably this type of dumping could be regarded as toxic waste, contaminating libraries with out-of-date information that not only makes it very difficult for library users to find useful information in amongst the rubbish but may even be detrimental if applied. Metaphors of pollution are also used to describe the role misinformation can play in derailing democratic processes. Within a discussion of libraries and democracy, Mohammed M. Aman talks about ‘information pollution from within and without’ to describe one of the barriers to the flow of information to support democratic processes (2006:91).
5. **FINDING MEANING IN THE METAPHORS**

So how do these various metaphorical representations of the library, in popular culture, within LIS literature from both Africa and the West, interact to highlight thematic challenges and opportunities for libraries and librarians committed to the idea that democracy belongs in the library. I have drawn out three threads for consideration now, threads that will no doubt be taken up in greater detail in other presentations at this workshop as we explore ways in which we can, as a profession, proactively promote democracy in African libraries and archives.

5.1 **Knowledge is power**

There is certainly a more explicit focus on the politics of information and civic engagement evident in the literature of African librarianship, no doubt informed by the political climate and rhetoric of the continent, but the issue of power pervades both external and internal representations of the library reviewed. A critical awareness of the library’s historical ability to hoard and control access to information is clearly represented by the images of fortresses and prisons, surveillance and in its most extreme form, the library as censor, governmental or religious, able to alter or destroy the human record without recourse. These images highlight the fact that although the maxim ‘knowledge is power’ has become a regular feature in contemporary discussions of the information society and the knowledge economy, the control of information by and in libraries has been, and arguably is still associated with privilege and power throughout history.

Within the African context, the representation of libraries as forces for imperialism and colonialism is an obvious expression of the imbalance of power being reinforced by control over information. Metaphors of poverty can also be interpreted within this paradigm as being poor is all too often synonymous with being powerless, especially when one’s primary source of wealth – oral knowledge – has no value in a print-dominated economy.

These metaphors highlight the need for librarians to open up the fortress to contestation. By promoting the idea of libraries and archives as contested sites of power, ideology and memory, by explicitly drawing attention to legal mechanisms that either limit or enable access to information, such as copyright, secrecy, and freedom of information legislation, libraries can encourage and, through the provision of information literacy training, better equip citizens to question on an ongoing basis who is controlling the way information is being presented or misrepresented, what is being withheld and why? As archivists Schwartz and Cook put it: ‘When power is denied, overlooked or unchallenged, it is misleading at best and dangerous at worst. Power recognized becomes power that can be questioned, made accountable, and open to transparent dialogue and enriched understanding’ (2002:2).

5.2 **The preservation of the human record(s)**

Within this context of censorship and control, concern for the preservation of the human record, represented by the images of memory and history becomes paramount. Primarily the LIBRARY AS MEMORY trope seems to highlight concerns over whether the human record is being preserved accurately and comprehensively, without alteration, for free use by future generations.
While it seems largely acknowledged that the library, as an institution, exhibits the necessary expertise in preservation, questions about whether all histories are in fact being recorded and preserved (as seen in the oral information environment in Africa) and if the shifting and impermanent digital information environment is being regularly captured for later retrieval. Interestingly, this trope is used optimistically in the fictional examples cited when expressing a subversive, grassroots initiative to contribute directly to this preservation process. Arguably, this will for participation and ownership at the community level is becoming more prevalent in contemporary library models to ensure that efforts are being made to preserve diversity and inclusivity in the human record(s). That said, there is significant work to be done by the information community in Africa to ensure that local histories are not being marginalized by unquestioning adherence to imported library structures and systems, or the uncritical admission of possible pollutants in the form of donated foreign library materials. There is also room to develop partnerships between different libraries and archives to recover lost or marginalized histories through oral history projects, to guard against future memory loss through preservation and digitization initiatives.

5.3 The library as a space for conversation and debate.

The final thread I would like to draw out of these metaphors is that of encouraging and celebrating voice in the library. Richard Hoggart asserts that ‘A well-running democracy will constantly quarrel with itself, publicly about the right things and in the right way’ (1995:340). Democratic processes of political participation, freedom of expression and the contestation of political ideas all hinge on the idea of finding and using voice to conduct these arguments.

Dispelling the SPY, the CENSOR, the POLICEMAN, libraries can provide citizens with a space, a SANCTUARY, a COMMONS in which to CONVERSE, to test their voices, to encounter and debate with the voices of others, written or spoken, from the past or present, without fear of censorship, surveillance, exclusion. As MEMORY, this space should ensure the inclusion of previously marginalized voices and histories in the library, encouraging dissenting voices to be contained in the same sphere, to argue over and draw attention to struggles for justice, the making of democracy, and the writing of history. The library also needs to shrug off ideas of neutrality and impartiality to find a voice to lobby for equal access to information, encourage participation and advocate for democracy on an ongoing basis.

In Archive fever, Derrida asserts that: ‘There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion—the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation (1996:4). If archives and libraries are committed to promoting democracy, we need to invite activism into the profession and into the library – to assert and protect the rights of access to information, encourage participation in the negotiation of meaning and preserve the memories of these debates for future interrogation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


