

The Implications of the Communications Revolution for African Studies

Dag Henrichsen and Giorgio Miescher (eds), *Documents and Researching Southern Africa: Aspects and Perspectives. Essays in Honour of Carl Schlettwein*
Basler Afrika Bibliographien [BAB], Creda Communications, Basel, 2001
191 pp
Numerous illustrations, many in colour
ISBN 3 905141 76 0
CHF 70.00

Since the emergence of African studies as a field of specialised academic research in the second half of the twentieth century, a number of libraries and archives in many parts of the world have proven to be treasure troves of valuable information. The Basel Centre for African Studies in Switzerland is one such locality. Over the years it has, thanks to the far-sighted initiatives of Carl Schlettwein (an indefatigable collector of Africana), taken its rightful place among the top institutions of its kind in the world.

In 2000 a symposium was held to commemorate Schlettwein's seventy-fifth birthday. At this event, information scientists and researchers contemplated the state of information available on Africa. Special attention was given to the state of material available on Namibia and the implications of the communications revolution for African studies. The contributions of fourteen participants in this event have been published in Henrichsen and Miescher's *Documents and Researching Southern Africa Aspects and Perspectives. Essays in Honour of Carl Schlettwein*.

For historians, this highly readable work is of particular interest. Not only does it deal with the libraries and documentary collections in archives, but it also provides valuable insights into the changing nature of researching Africa in the era of the communications revolution.

Prospective researchers of Namibian history will find the contributions of Namibian librarian Marian Gei-Khoibes, as well as Werner Hillebrecht and Dag Henrichsen, most informative. Librarians have been grappling with the implications of the internet as device for locating information since the early 1990s. At the turn of the new century, there were already clear indications of a methodological sensibility that had permeated thinking on how this powerful search and research instrument could be used effectively. Now, some four years down the line, it is remarkable to contemplate the progress that has subsequently taken place. The work presented in the text is not all dated. The contributors share some of the typical problems frequently experienced in the information industry with the reader. At the same time they share thoughts on some of the remarkable accomplishments that have been achieved, thanks to the work of expert librarians, bibliographers, archivists and information technology specialists.

Understandably, a lot of attention is given to the contribution of the Swiss bibliophile, Carl Schlettwein. Starting out in 1952 with the first purchase of a book in Cape Town, he managed to let his interests gravitate in the direction of collecting Namibiana at a time when few collectors deemed it as being of any significance. When he returned from Namibia to Switzerland in the mid-1960s, this passion led to the establishment of a home-based information centre which soon became part of a

flourishing industry of reportage and bibliographical production. The Basler Afrika Bibliographien-series was but one of the many branches of publication to make a definitive impact on the research knowledge of Africa, with a specific accent on Namibia and Southern Africa.

The scope of the book is comprehensive. In her contribution, Barbara Turfan, librarian at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, gives an exposition of how the changing accent in the British tertiary educational sector has forced librarians at this bastion of African studies to cater for the needs of an undergraduate readership, along with that of advanced research scholars. It is apparent that the developing field of materials online, such as JSTOR and a variety of other online consortium collections, such as GAELIC, enabled librarians to look beyond the reality of mere hardcopies. Increasingly researchers in all parts of the world tapped into the information at libraries and electronic resource centres.

For the bibliophile, the contribution of Marcelle Weiner dealing with early modern European writing on Africa is a provocative statement on the need to “re-search” these often overlooked sources. As librarian at the prestigious Brenthurst Library in Johannesburg, she is in a good position to express some constructive opinions. Citing and illustrating some publications, she argues in favour of the need to constantly reconsider the body of contemporary knowledge on Africa. It presents a fertile landscape for researchers. She is justified when pointing out:

Memory needs to be recovered, suspicion needs to be overcome, and the courage and confidence to go back to these sources needs to be found. The information needs to be extrapolated from the early texts so that a new, more encompassing story can be written, one that will begin to approach a rational and truthful link with the past
(p 113)

The work contains information on visual sources, with Regula Iselin and Giorgio Miescher respectively sharing their views on the photographic and poster collections in the BAB.

It may be that the publication addresses specialised issues particularly of relevance to information scientists. There is, however, something else to the work as well. Phyllis Bischoff’s observation on cooperation between South African, European and American libraries conveys the underlying message that there is a need to look at libraries and information facilities in a more holistic manner. The potential of missionary archives are also showcased by Paul Jenkins and Teresa Cruz de Silva. In particular, for researchers who are prepared to look across the fences of their own specialised fields of investigation, *Documents and Researching Southern Africa* offers some insights into the world of the materials from which Africa can be re-opened in a constructive manner. At CHF 70-00 (about R350-00), the book may be too expensive for the average researcher’s private collection. It would however be a valuable asset for any research library.

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