

Cataloguing in Malawi : a country report

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The Country

Malawi is a country located in southeastern Africa, to the south of the Equator between latitudes 9 degrees 45 minutes and 17 degrees 16 minutes, and from longitudes 33 degrees 35 minutes. It is 900 Kilometers long, with a width varying between 80 Kilometers and 60 Kilometers. Malawi has a total area of 118, 484 square Kilometers, bordered by Zambia to the north-west, Tanzania to the north, and Mozambique surrounding it on the east, south, and west.

Malawi has been described as 'the warm heart of Africa, and is one of Africa's smallest but most densely populated countries, with a total population estimated to be just over 12 million people. All languages are written using Latin script.

Having been established as the British protectorate of Nyasaland in 1891, Malawi gained its independence in 1964. For three decades Malawi was governed by the self declared President-for-Life Kamuzu Banda. The country held its first multiparty elections in 1994 and has enjoyed a multiparty democracy since.

Libraries

The first establishment of libraries of books and other printed materials in Malawi is normally attributed to missionaries meant to serve their own Christians. In the 1890s, missionaries established libraries in Northern Malawi, at Likoma Island on Lake Malawi, in Blantyre in the

South and in other parts of the country where they settled. They were started from gifts of books from churches in Britain and from individuals who were returning home.

At the same, the initiative of individuals, concerned about lack of social services in local towns, set up subscription libraries for Europeans, but such libraries remained exclusively for use by whites until the end of the colonial era.

From the 1950s, the British Council and the United States Information Service established free libraries open to all races in towns, with expanded services in branch libraries, and postal and book boxes to secondary schools, district councils and other notable institutions.

The post independence period after 1964 saw the new government initiating the establishment of properly instituted libraries. In 1967 Parliament passed an Act to establish the National Library Service which would “promote, establish, equip, manage, maintain and develop libraries in Malawi.” The National Archives of Malawi (which enjoys the status of any National Library, including legal deposit) was born out from the branch of the Central African Archives. The establishment of the University of Malawi in 1965 brought with it the start of a powerful library service run along professional lines over the years. Other notable libraries include government and international research libraries.

At the beginning, almost all notable libraries were started and headed by expatriate librarians from Britain, and these were instrumental in developing the library profession in the country. A number of young Malawians were sent to Britain and elsewhere to obtain library professional qualifications. On return, qualified librarians have helped in the development of various libraries. They contributed to the formation of the Malawi Library Association in 1976, which has since played a major role in the development of librarianship by providing training for library staff and offering technical advice to organizations throughout the country.

However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the level of library recruitment and training at professional levels did not keep pace with the dwindling numbers of qualified librarians due to deaths, retirement and seeking after greener pastures outside the country. It is only after the establishment of Diploma and Bachelor of Library and Information Science courses in the Faculty of Information Science and Communications at Mzuzu University that we see a brighter future for the profession in the country

Catalogues, Cataloguing and Classification

It is mainly when expatriate librarians established libraries in the country after Independence that proper catalogues were introduced. However, looking back to the mid-60s, it seems there were no generally world-wide accepted guidelines. The early cataloguers and classifiers were left free to introduce cataloguing and classification systems of their own, according to their own experience and imagination. Generally speaking, the public libraries adopted **card catalogues** and the **Dewey Classification** system. The University of Malawi however introduced the **Bliss Classification Scheme**, together with a **strip index type of catalogue (stripdex)**. While the arguments for introducing these systems may have been sound at the that time, it has proved costly and time consuming to subsequently change to the **Library of Congress Classification and Subject Headings** and **card catalogues** at first, then to automated library catalogues in the mid-1990s. Current training of all library staff in the country places greater emphasis on the Dewey and Library of Congress Classification and Subject Headings (used by the university libraries), and card and automated MARC cataloguing.

Bibliographic Description and Authority Control

The National Archives of Malawi publishes the printed form of the **Malawi National Bibliography** since 1968. Their cataloguing has adopted ISBD rules and arrangement of entries is by Dewey Classification. Most of the national publications in Malawi are also purchased by the Library of Congress through a Nairobi Office in Kenya and so are

eventually catalogued by the Library of Congress. Most of the local cataloguing follows AACR2R, ISBD or Library of Congress practice. There are very few people with skills in original cataloguing. In any case, there are very few cataloguers in the country as a whole and there is not much work in authority control.

Data Formatting Standards

It is only the University of Malawi that has a commercially-acquired library management software (Library.Solution of the Library Corporation) capable of handling full MARC21 bibliographic records. Otherwise, some libraries that have attempted automated cataloguing have tended to use in-house, CD/ISIS or WINISIS with UNIMARC to code their records. Currently, an open source software, KOHA, from New Zealand is on trial in several libraries on LINUX computers.

Conclusion

Cataloguing systems in Malawi are generally based on AACR2R and it is difficult to see much change. All our training institutions encourage the adoption of these practices. Problems exist because there are not many skilled cataloguers in the country to properly apply the rules, classification schemes and subject headings. The hope is that increased professional library school training will enhance such skills.