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### **Provocative thoughts of a new generation of Librarians**

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The struggle to bestow to scientific information its first mission which is to facilitate exchange of ideas between researchers and then to contribute to the progress of science and of society is hardly achieved in Africa in general.

As well reading facilities that should give the citizen free access to information in order to train himself, to fulfil himself, and to develop freedom of opinion are still very weak, indeed non-existent. We do not really possess libraries worthy of the name. For example, I can refer to a case I know very well by saying that, in Senegal, public reading is still in an embryonic state, as illustrated in an inquiry made by ASBAD for the new Senegalese Direction du Livre et de la lecture ; the national library is still a project ; apart from the efforts of the cultural centres of foreign countries, reading facilities are scarce. In this general climate of stagnation, university libraries are the only ones carrying hope.

It is obvious that the image of the librarian is not often a glorifying one. Besides, the rural population represents 70% in Africa, of which a major part is illiterate. Librarians did not always succeed in taking up the challenge to meet the needs of this population. Public authorities have not made access to information for this great mass a priority. We can understand that the non-existence of big library institutions (except academic libraries) have contributed to stress the ignorance of the role of the librarian and consequently the negative image of the librarian. I still remember that, when I was nineteen (19) and passed the entrance

examination of the Library School, an examination gathering over seven hundred (700) candidates, my parents could hardly understand I gave up studying law for a job consisting of « arranging » books.

And here is the appearance of the Information and Communication Technologies stressing this negative image. The announcement of the imminent disappearance of the book explains some people affirming that the librarian, and the library as a physical area would no longer survive as well. Consequently, the librarian as a man of culture and a humanist, should become as databases designer and a search engine specialist. I heard a very serious person suggest the elimination of the library Section of EBAD, so that is keep only the Documentation Section. For, the stipulated that they do not find a job, and in case they find it, they receive the lowest wages any way. Therefore, some would like we already enter a big market of digital information where everyone would be free to choose, from his place, an information. This situation would be the ideal one, except the fact that, presently, anyone has his own computer, and has no means to pay the connection. Besides, even if by chance, everyone was provided with a computer, thanks to the partners in development, illiteracy (particularly in international languages) would be an obstacle for them to use it. We can add to this the weakness of telecommunication infrastructures in our countries.

In such a situation, some of our elders have succeeded to carry on a splendid career. We owe to them the legislation on libraries dating back to 1976 and the first professional associations that combined to give birth to ASBAD. But many of them have resigned, have changed profession or have desperately waited anonymously their retirement.

From this generation, we have also inherited *ad hominen* quarrels we continue. That is one of the problems we are trying to solve nowadays in our association. So the situation of unemployment of library professionals, who are more and more young, contribute to demobilise our members. How to give a voluntary help in an association when the majority does not get the minimum ? As well, the professionals already working live in a situation of poverty due to their low wages. This discouraging phenomena, creates a deep discomfort in which people often mislead targets. That is the reason why those struggling to go ahead are suspected to use the association for their own benefit.

Here is, in nutshell, the situation of Information-Documentation professionals such as I experience it. How to found a strong association which is able to take up such great challenges ?

This is the question our team is trying to face since the beginning of its mandate on July 2000. One of our priorities has been to depersonalise our association by providing it with an office.

The EBAD, Library School has given its assistance by providing us with a room for our office. But we jealously keep our independence. Now, each member can come to the office to get informed, to work and to attend the meetings of the staff. As the sessions are public one, the idea of an association – « group of friends » tend to disappear. But prejudices are tenacious. But the existence of the office raises other problems related to recurrent expenses its management involves.

We have been obliged to implement a system to manage our members. Before, everyone could become a member without possessing a card from the association, without subscribing and participating in the activities. One could want for the General Assembly to get elected and then disappear until the next meeting. From now, the association has settled strict procedures of management and functioning.

Globally, some efforts have been done on an internal level. On the international level, we have tried to get support from the associations of the North. These ones being older, more experienced, and stronger could help us win the lobbying we wish to undertake in order to make our association recognized locally by public authorities as an association of public interest. This lobbying program intended to entertain an active communication by organizing continuous training sessions for our members, scientific meetings

and various other manifestations. For this reason, we are really interested in the idea of twinning associations proposed by IFLA. We have contacted many associations. Any of our attempt has been fruitful. Why ? I really do not know. We can merely think that the relationship between professional associations dealing with libraries is also within the framework of the traditional geopolitical, linguistic, and economic scheme that governs the world with its formalism and linguistic areas. Yet, the only identity in which we recognize ourselves is that of the librarian. For us, languages represent tools of communication. In Africa, we are not exclusively English-speaking, French-speaking or Portuguese-speaking countries. What would become our local languages and ethnical groups if we exclusively belong is one of these communities ? We already speak necessarily many languages. We have hybrid and multilingual cultures. Each African country is above all a melting-pot. Librarianship should take into account this old order.

But should we be disappointed of our weak results ? I do not think so. In fact, even in Africa, the library should remain a vital centre for free and democratic access to knowledge, an area for exchange and partnership with our populations ; our scientists, an area for training for our young students. It is necessary to implement in less developed countries, more than at an economic level, support programs for a free and democratic access to the library and to knowledge. A colleague to whom I said we should entertain the unbelievable idea of organizing an IFLA Conference in Dakar, answered : « fortunately you realize yourself that it is an unbelievable idea ! what are going to show them, as for as libraries are concerned ? Where are we going to organize receptions for delegates ? » He was more shocked when I told him it is just for these problems we should do it. We must show to the international community of librarians – IFLA actually represents at a professional level what the United-Nations represents at a political level – that if there are prestigious libraries somewhere, reading facilities hardly exist somewhere else. IFLA could sensitise better our public authorities – our decision – makers, as it is said – than our national association would do. But let us stop dreaming that would be enough for IFLA to wok at the reinforcement of the capacities of the associations by modest and efficient actions.

In any case, since the beginning of our mandate, we are putting emphasis on the visibility of our profession and our association. We are trying to master the seven ways Elizabeth C. Reade Fong suggests, in order to change things. It is our duty to reinforce the skills of our members working in public relations by training sessions, ponder over a code of deontology and an professional ethics, to enter national organisations and institutions in order to emphasize the positive image of the professionals, to evaluate economically the services we are offering, to maximize the quality of our documentary services and products, to use the terminology of information science so that to show we are not merely technicians in the organization of information, and finally, to integrate the philosophy of our decision-makers. Do not ask, me how we are going to realize all this.

I am afraid I cannot tell you.