

# Fifty years of Tanzania's national/public library service

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**Alli AS Mcharazo**

Tanzania Library Services Board, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

**Anthony Olden**

Graduate School, University of West London, London, UK

## Abstract

National cum public library services were set up in Tanzania and in a number of other African countries just before or shortly after independence. In addition to being the national public library service, the Tanzania Library Services Board (TLSB) is a legal deposit library and produces the national bibliography. Starting from virtually nothing, TLSB was operating purpose-built libraries in the main urban centres by the mid-1970s. It received much support from the Tanzanian government and from foreign donors up until then, but afterwards the financial situation became more difficult. However, 50 years after its introduction, TLSB operates 21 regional, 18 district, and one divisional library. It has approximately 400 staff. Like other national public library services in Africa, the main challenge has been to extend service to the rural areas where the majority of the population live. A newer challenge is to adapt a traditional service to the environment of young Tanzanians growing up with the mobile phone and the internet.

## Keywords

Archive and documentation studies, library development, library studies, Tanzania, Tanzania Library Services Board

## Introduction

Tanzania's national/public library service came into existence on 1 April 1964, one of a number of similar organisations across Africa that started with the Gold Coast (later

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**Corresponding author:** Alli AS Mcharazo, Tanzania Library Services Board, PO Box 9283, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Email: amcharazo@hotmail.com

Ghana) Library Board in 1950. The founding director of the Tanganyika Library Service (its original name according to the 1963 Act that brought it into existence), Max Broom, came from a background of British public libraries. But Tanzania, Ghana, Zambia, Kenya, Malawi, Botswana and other territories independent or soon-to-be independent from the United Kingdom set out to organise public library service on a national rather than – as in the United Kingdom – a local basis (Lor, 2015). One exception to this was Nigeria, where public libraries were organised on a regional and then on a state basis when the regions were abolished, and where a separate national library was later set up. One difference between Tanzania and the other national/public library services is that it does not have responsibility for the entire country: Zanzibar (the islands of Unguja and Pemba) did not merge with the mainland until 1964, and Tanzania Library Services Board's (TLSB) jurisdiction was never extended to Zanzibar.

The new library boards also assumed national library responsibilities, for example, the production of the national bibliography, again differentiating them from public libraries in the United Kingdom. However, according to Mulindwa (2015), it is the public library rather than the national role that has tended to receive more emphasis in Africa, because public libraries reach more people. In some instances, local academic libraries had already taken on some national library roles, and had mixed feelings about relinquishing them. The Library of University College Ibadan (later the University of Ibadan) produced the national bibliography from 1950 to 1970, when the new National Library of Nigeria took over. The Library of University College, Dar es Salaam (later the University of Dar es Salaam), which opened in 1961, had started an East African collection. At the International Conference on African Bibliography in Nairobi in 1967, the librarian of University College, Dar es Salaam, maintained that 'in East Africa at any rate' the university college libraries ought to produce the national bibliographies and act as exchange centres for government publications in their capacity as university and national reference libraries (Holdsworth, 1970: 54).

## Support and money

Strong professional leadership combined with strong political support gave public libraries a head start in Ghana and Tanzania in the early years of independence (Olden, 2015). Tanzania's Julius Nyerere was intensely aware of the importance of education, literacy and libraries (Olden, 2005). As early as 1946, after being sponsored for his degree in education at Makerere College in Uganda, Nyerere acknowledged that 'people may actually have died through lack of medicine merely because eighty pounds which could have been spent on a fine village dispensary was spent on me, a mere individual . . . How can I ever repay this debt to the community?' He concluded that 'the educated man is not important in himself; his importance lies in what he can do for the community of which he is a member' (cited in Molony, 2014: 85).

At a conference in 1965, the then director of Library Services said that he had imagined his biggest problem would be to obtain enough money. But this was not the case, and in fact the Ministry of Education and local authorities had 'shown themselves eager to make sacrifices in order to obtain libraries for the people of their townships' (Broome, 1966: 69).

In neighbouring Kenya, on the other hand, the government was not very supportive about the setting up of a national public library service (Rosenberg, 1993). In addition, TLSB was receiving aid from countries such as the United Kingdom and Denmark.

As in most other parts of the continent, the financial situation became more difficult in the 1970s. For Tanzania, there was the additional cost of assistance in Uganda's overthrow of its dictator Idi Amin as the decade came to an end. It was clear that expansion could not continue as before. In what was to be an influential paper, Mchombu (1982: 245) concluded that 'information services must be tailored to the economic ability of a country . . . [otherwise] the lucky few may have a very good service, but most people will have no service at all, or a service that is inadequate and at prohibitive distances'.

As years went by, it became obvious that there were not enough resources to open more libraries, or even to always carry out necessary renovations to the existing ones. A public-private partnership renovated the National Central Library in the centre of Dar es Salaam and extended the building upwards, with office space rented out on the top floors. Other public-private partnerships are under discussion, under which some libraries built 30–40 years ago and now in need of repair would be demolished, with the multistorey buildings replacing them including library space. Such arrangements would also bring in income for the library service. Partnerships with a number of district councils have also been established, for example, in Ngara and Rulenge in Kagera region. The council provides the building – usually an existing building rather than a purpose-built one – and the junior staff, while TLSB provides the stock and someone to run the library (Olden and Mcharazo, 2013).

## Users and stock

One constant over the last half century has been the use of public libraries in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa by young people striving to advance their formal education. Children read stories for pleasure, and newspapers are very popular with young adults, but all use the public library as a quiet study space. They bring their own school or college books with them as well as using library material. Unfortunately, usage drops off after formal education is completed. Public libraries in the West are popular with middle-aged and older people reading primarily for recreation, but in Africa, the emphasis among such age groups is on reading for news.

Another constant is the fact that the stock is still overwhelmingly comprised of English language material. In 1961, the year in which the country became independent and Julius Nyerere became prime minister, Nyerere spent his evenings translating *Julius Caesar* into Kiswahili (Wilson-Lee, 2016). He went on to translate *The Merchant of Venice* some years later. Despite such an inspiring example, the number of titles published in Kiswahili each year is still limited, although some are also published in neighbouring Kenya. The total number of volumes published in English and Kiswahili each year in Tanzania is in the region of 600–800, of which many are school textbooks (Mcharazo, 2008). Despite the increase in the number of higher education institutions in Tanzania in recent years, the number of academic and professional journals published in the country is small and their longevity is variable. Tanzanian academics have to submit most of their papers outside the country for publication.

One difference is that the TLSB like a number of other national/public library services in Africa now charges subscription fees, which were introduced in the 1990s. The Kenya National Library Service, however, points out on its website that it has stopped charging fees ‘in order to make library services affordable to Kenyans and to encourage book borrowing’ (Kenya National Library Service, 2016).

## **Support from donors**

Another difference is that the book stock of TLSB and of other national/public library services is now heavily dependent on donors. Rosenberg (2002) estimated that donations accounted for between 90% and 100% of acquisitions in African libraries, concluding that they had come to replace institutional budgets rather than supplement them. The situation has changed little since then. TLSB’s main book donor since the 1960s is Book Aid International in the United Kingdom. For many years, Book Aid donated good-quality books no longer needed by other libraries, but now it donates new publications. In addition to providing stock, Book Aid has established ‘Children’s Corners’ in 17 regional libraries. These contain new books, some of which are in Kiswahili. Children International in the United States donated nearly 600,000 volumes between 2007 and 2015. Thirty percent of these were kept by TLSB, the rest distributed to schools and communities.

Through the Publishers Association of Tanzania, TLSB has received over 218,000 volumes from local publishers. Many of these are in Kiswahili.

The proportion of the Tanzanian population in the formal economy is small: civil servants, local government workers, teachers, doctors, nurses, employees of large companies and so on. Many Tanzanians are small farmers, operate small businesses or work in other sectors of the non-formal economy. Both TLSB and the Namibia Library and Archives Service are in partnership with the Finnish Library Association in order to develop staff capacity in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) with a view to passing on these skills to groups such as poultry-keepers. The project is supported by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Mcharazo et al., 2014).

Other ICT support has come from the Chinese Embassy in Dar es Salaam, which supplied the National Central Library with computers for public use, from UNESCO, and from the Japanese and Korean International Development corporations. China has sponsored two TLSB staff for master’s programmes in Shanghai.

## **Linking up with local, national and international priorities**

Libraries do not operate in a vacuum. TLSB comes under the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Vocational Training, and the director-general plays a full role with the ministry’s other senior officers in drafting the annual budget proposals for parliament. Ministers and members of parliament ask for books for their constituencies and it is politic to attend to such requests. Every effort is made to bring TLSB events to the attention of politicians and senior civil servants, with results such as the attendance of the prime minister, the minister for Education and the commissioner for the Coastal

Region at the graduation ceremony of the School of Library, Archive and Documentation Studies (SLADS) in 2013.

Sustainable Development Goals have followed on from Millennium Development Goals, and a national/public library service needs to be alert to international development priorities as well as to government policies. Malaria is a major health problem in Africa, as is HIV/AIDS. Maternal mortality continues to be a concern. With the assistance of the charity Partnerships in Health Information and financial support from the UK's Department for International Development, TLSB was involved in a 3-year project with the Library of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in London and the Library of Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), the main medical school in Tanzania. Health corners were set up in a number of public libraries, with information in Kiswahili and English. An information literacy module was introduced into the curriculum at MUHAS, and a health information module at SLADS. The importance of protecting the environment is another national concern, and a module on environmental issues has been introduced at SLADS.

The discovery of large reserves of gas and oil off the coast is likely to have a major impact on the economy in the years ahead. The National Central Library is planning to start a business library, and then extend its activities to the regions, with particular emphasis on gas and oil in Mtwara and Lindi regions. The Norwegian-based international energy company Statoil has already renovated Mtwara Regional Library, which was in poor condition. It has promised to support the library further with textbooks and ICT equipment.

## **Education and training**

Probably the most striking difference between Tanzania and other African national/public library services is that TLSB runs a library school with over 1000 students. The setting-up of a library school by an African library service is not new. The Ghana Library Board opened a school in 1961, but transferred it to the University of Ghana 4 years later. The University of Ibadan Library in Nigeria ran a diploma programme in the early 1960s until control passed to a newly established department. The MA Information Studies that the University of Dar es Salaam introduced in 1997 was taught by staff of the university library. But what is new is the fact that an educational institution the size of SLADS that now has over 1000 non-graduate certificate, diploma I and diploma II students still comes under the authority of a national/public library service. This is unlikely to continue indefinitely.

New national/public library services in the 1960s had to educate and train local staff as quickly as possible. The TLSB was able to send some of its new staff to the United Kingdom and elsewhere under aid programmes. It also sent staff to Uganda for the 2-year non-graduate diploma at Makerere University. The intention in the 1960s was that the new East African School of Librarianship at Makerere would serve Kenya and Tanzania as well as Uganda, but the political situation in Uganda in the 1970s and early 1980s was not conducive. In Tanzania itself, the University of Dar es Salaam contemplated setting up a programme, and debate took place as to whether this should be at undergraduate or postgraduate level. The TLSB had authority under the Tanzania

Library Services Board Act, 1975 (which replaced the 1963 Act) to provide facilities for the study of librarianship and to award certificates and diplomas. The TLSB director, EE Kaungamno, had started his career with the organisation as training officer. He felt that his library service could not put up with indefinite delay, and set up the SLADS in collaboration with the National Archives (Olden and Mcharazo, 2002).

SLADS offers a 2-year non-graduate diploma, to which students were first admitted in 1989. It also offers a 1-year non-graduate certificate programme, originally offered by the Dar es Salaam College of National Education. In the West, professional staff in national libraries usually have a postgraduate qualification in librarianship or information science and an undergraduate degree in a different subject. In Tanzania and in other national/public library services in Africa, many will have gone from non-graduate certificate in librarianship to non-graduate diploma to undergraduate degree, topped up with a master's in some cases. People take what opportunities come their way. This route has both advantages and disadvantages, the most obvious disadvantage being repetition of content (Sturges and Neill, 1998).

In the 1990s, student numbers were modest, but between 2007 and 2016, they increased from 150 to over 1000. Starting from rented premises in Bagamoyo, over an hour's drive up the coast to the north of Dar es Salaam, SLADS now occupies its own purpose-built campus, which is rapidly expanding. Evening classes are put on for parallel intakes of diploma students in the National Central Library. They are an attractive option for those who have day jobs in Tanzania's biggest city. Another attractive option is the preparatory course introduced for students who have not performed as well as they might have in their O level examinations (Ordinary level examinations are taken at the end of four years of secondary education). This provides some with a second chance, because if they pass the preparatory course they will be admitted to the certificate.

Almost all full-time SLADS staff members are TLSB librarians on secondment. A number are master's graduates, but the majority hold a bachelor's degree in librarianship from Tumaini University. Most are recent graduates sponsored by TLSB, which has been actively assisting its staff to improve their qualifications. All SLADS staff are anxious to advance their formal education, but no one as yet has a doctorate, and research and publication opportunities are not being exploited. The Tanzanian entries in *Library and Information Science Abstracts* from 2000 to 2016 include papers on academic libraries, information needs and Information and Communication Technology. National/public library service receives little attention: it is not a popular research area today. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the then TLSB director and the then assistant director (later deputy director) wrote in detail about the service (see Kaungamno and Ilomo, 1979, vol. 2, and Ilomo, 1985, in particular). Such substantial pieces of writing were unusual on the part of senior staff of a national/public library service, and are of historical interest. TLSB also produced an occasional paper series in those years.

## Challenges

Like similar services elsewhere in Africa, TLSB's biggest challenge is still to extend beyond the urban areas and reach the grassroots. Botswana made a particular effort to do

this according to Mulindwa (2015). Its National Library Service collaborated with the Department of Non-Formal Education to establish village reading rooms, putting on workshops so that extension workers could write material in Setswana. With its cattle and diamonds and its much smaller population, Botswana is a wealthier country than Tanzania, but even this effort was not entirely successful, although it later led to extending ICT to rural areas.

TLSB collaboration with district councils has already been mentioned. What is the standard of these libraries? They provide books to their young users, a service that has not been provided in these districts before. They are not purpose-built, like Tanzania's new libraries of the 1960s and 1970s. Those were first class in terms of quality, but they never got further than the main urban areas, and money was not available to sustain a mobile library service. The Carnegie Corporation of New York has been attempting to promote model libraries in parts of Africa. In the early years of the 21st century, it gave the Botswana National Library Service and the Kenya National Library Service money for planning and then US\$2 million dollars each for the development of model libraries, until it concluded that 'unfortunately neither of these libraries lived up to its promise' (Theroux, 2012: 5).

Carnegie then confined its African public library support to South Africa, with which it had links since the 1920s, and to which it has always been generous (it did, however, support some university libraries elsewhere in Africa). This involved giving substantial amounts of money for the development of a number of South African public libraries, with the municipalities paying for the cost of the buildings. These libraries were intended to be exemplary. As Carnegie's Rookaya Bawa explained:

Just like a special needs school should have the best teachers, not the crumbs from the table, by the same token libraries for underrepresented people should offer the very best service. They must be *exemplary* model libraries . . . Carnegie Corporation supports the building of wonderful model libraries that represent the best of everything a library can be (in Theroux, 2012: 3).

But how manageable is this for more than the fortunate few in a developing country? 'Only the best is good enough for Africa' is an admirable slogan. But how realistic is it?

## Conclusion

The mobile phone has revolutionised communication for all ages in Africa, but especially for the young. Information is accessed via the internet, and much of it is free. Mchombu (2014) points out how things have changed since the 1960s, when Tanzania had no more than a few newspapers, a single radio station and a small number of libraries. After 50 years, Tanzania's national/public library service is still used in the traditional way, that is largely by young people reading their own and the service's printed material to improve their level of formal education. TLSB has come a long way in half a century, but its newest challenge must be to find ways of adapting to and linking up with the communication and information world in which young Tanzanians live today.

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## Author biographies



**Alli AS Mcharazo** is director general of the Tanzania Library Services Board and an Honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals. Before being appointed to his present position in 2007, he served as director of Library Services at Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences, and before that as head of the Library at what is now Ardhi University. He is a board member of Tanzania National Archives, the National Museum of Tanzania and the Tanzania Institute of Adult Education.



**Anthony Olden** is an associate professor in the Graduate School of the University of West London, and a former lecturer at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. He is the external examiner for the School of Library, Archive and Documentation Studies, Bagamoyo, Tanzania. He writes about libraries, information, education and development, especially in Africa.