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against HIV/AIDS in Africa

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## Hegemony of the West and the Librarian's Role in the Struggle against HIV/AIDS in Africa

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### Abstract

Africa needs information about HIV/AIDS. Librarian activists have a duty to organize, repack-age, and circulate HIV/AIDS information. Unfortunately, this has led in some cases to an unin-tentional assertion of cultural hegemony, which operates invisibly to those who are part of the "dominant" or "dominating" culture. Unexamined assumptions of "superiority" have led to a bias that the West possesses the only correct method for codifying knowledge. The West cannot appropriately evaluate the successes or failures of HIV/AIDS education in Africa if it employs only American or Western ideas, categories, and sensibilities. This is detrimental to African people and cultures lacking the materials needed to protect themselves. A better method is needed to offer information in a way that appeals to the recipients' cultural norms and values.

### Introduction

"The bonds of subjection are like the swad-dling clothes [children] are wrapt up in, and supported by, in the weakness of their in-fancy; age and reason as they grow loosen them, till at length they drop quite off, and leave a man at his own free disposal."<sup>1</sup> John Locke believed that all people were born as *tabulae rasae* (blank slates) and saw the role of the father or parent as being one of custo-dian or overseer until the child reached a stage of development at which he or she achieved individuality and earned all the rights of the adult. American library activ-ism unfortunately falls into this quasi-parental role at times wherein the activists act as "parents" instructing "children" of other cultures. Like Locke's par-ent/government, the library as an institu-tion is placed in a position of power and must wield that power for the greater good. By "librarian activist" I mean trained libra-rians who put their skills to use in areas of social interest with the aim of producing the greater good. In relation to the greater good, the ethics outlined in various docu-ments of the American Library Association and Canadian Library Association provide a framework designed to bring about the greater good and an authentic commonweal. In desiring to act in the best interests of oth-

er cultures, librarian activists can easily be-come blind to their own Western biases. It is important for the activists to become more aware of the inherent problems in the sys-tems and paradigms they follow, and make changes to better suit the needs of so-called developing nations.

According to the branch of moral philoso-phy that deals with duty and right action known as 'deontology,' it is the moral obli-gation of those with power to use that pow-er to bring about a greater good. Not sur-prisingly, this is not as straightforward as it first seems. The tenets of deontology, for example, indicate that it is not sufficient to bring about an end that, on its surface, is good and right. The actions forming the base of that end must also proceed from eth-ically defensible actions. The duty of those wishing to bring about positive change is to produce the maximum good with a mini-mum of harm. As a byproduct of the inhe-rent power differential that develops be-tween an institution and those dependent on that institution, governments and other agencies in society, including libraries, often lose sight of this duty. This power differ-ential often may not be expressed in a violent or even overt manner. It can work invisibly, and with the consent of those affected by it – in short, the arrangement can be hegemonic.

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In order to examine the problems that hegemonic thinking causes, this paper examines the actions of some library activists in Africa, a continent ravaged by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

This paper unfolds in two parts. The first deals specifically with the matter of Western hegemony in various forms. The second focuses on the role of the librarian, hopefully sensitive to the issues of hegemony, in dealing with the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa. More specifically, the topic of librarian activism against HIV/AIDS in Africa is so broad that, for the purposes of this study, the investigation will begin with a review of the scholarly discourse offered on the subject. Understanding the subtle but pervasive Western biases operative in the way the subject is handled provides a framework for understanding the immensity and complexity of this difficult topic. Next, it is necessary to examine the ways in which HIV/AIDS information available in Africa is cataloged and classified, as this provides insights into the apparent underlying assumptions of some activist librarians. Beyond that, we must investigate the ways in which people themselves are classified and how those classifications may differ from self-perceptions. Also necessary is a discussion of the way the information itself is presented and controlled since presentation affects greatly the way in which people receive and process knowledge. This will lead to the last issue addressed, the importance of reaching the intended audience through the lens of cultural sensitivity. If activist librarians in the West, and specifically those in the United States of America, are to be partners with Africans in the struggle against HIV/AIDS, it is imperative that they do so in a way that is culturally sensitive, that recognizes a multiplicity of epistemological approaches, and is mostly devoid of patriarchal tropes.

### **Part One: Issues of Western Hegemony**

#### **Problematic Scholarship**

The existing scholarship pertaining to American activism on the continent of Africa is filled with harmful, albeit likely unintentional, biases. Examining biases provides insight into how easy it is to slip into cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony, as explained by Antonio Gramsci, is the way in which prevailing cultural norms and mores tend to be considered natural or even inevitable.<sup>2</sup> This tendency towards cultural hegemony hides the reality of the unequal balance of power between those who determine norms and those who must obey them. Social structures are comprised of a complex layering of ideas and ethos, usually set in place by those in power. Therefore, it is necessary to examine current cultural norms as they exist in institutions, practices, and belief systems in order to be aware of their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of domination. Given this particular framework of hegemony, it is not difficult to find, for example, instances of linguistic dominance in American rhetoric, even when that rhetoric is directed ostensibly toward the "greater good."

DeVry University professor, Jerry Harris, remarks in a recent article, "America's self-conception as a country uniquely chosen by history, culture, and God to lead the world is deeply rooted in the US ruling class, particularly within the military/industrial complex."<sup>3</sup> The United States of America (hereafter, America) is used to exerting its values on a world stage and expects a welcome if not enthusiastic response. From this perspective, then, for such a culture – convinced of its God-given preeminence in all things technological, intellectual, and moral – it can be surprising or even shocking when "client" nations reject or alter those values. While many nations are or would be receptive to American ideas and suggestions, as Harris notes, that reception is hardly homogeneous or without conflict.<sup>4</sup> Nagging problems with language exacerbate this situation further, especially where language can be a powerful tool of cultural colonization.

Intentional or not, the current scholarship on the efforts of librarians in combating HIV/AIDS in Africa is rife with patronizing and colonizing language that betrays the deeply rooted hegemonic core of these efforts. As is often the case, scholars from the culturally “dominant” group write such articles, and because of the naturalizing effects of hegemony they are largely unaware of the powerful and “loaded” concepts their words and efforts connote. It is important to focus on and recognize the fact that these biases exist, that the biases are culturally ingrained, and then to understand the way these biases describe “the other” when writing about non-American cultures. Such a focus will help scholars and activist librarians avoid, or at least temper, the effects of cultural hegemony.

A case in point is found in an article by Stephen Mutula dealing with libraries handling HIV/AIDS materials. Writing about the digital divide in sub-Saharan Africa, Mutula attempts to explain that Western knowledge systems have been pre-packaged following standard Western library practices and then deployed in Africa without any attempt to re-package them to suit local tastes. He states, “The lack of local content and the means to access adequately any locally generated knowledge implies that even among sub-Saharan African people, knowledge is not adequately shared despite the communal nature of society.”<sup>5</sup> While recounting the ways in which sub-Saharan African cultures acquire knowledge through a community-based approach, the author inadvertently subordinates sub-Saharan methods of generating and disseminating knowledge to Western methods. Although the author acknowledges that the poor publishing capabilities and reading culture of sub-Saharan Africa lead to a dearth of information, his assumption appears to be that Western levels of publishing and literacy are the highest standards of legitimate, accepted knowledge, and this assumption tends to transform his assessment into a value judgment.

Most current scholars writing in the field of librarianship cannot be charged, one as-

sumes, with intentionally casting people into the category of “those who must obey.” The language often used in American scholarship, however, is so intrinsically connected to America’s own sets of values that it is often difficult if not impossible to notice the biases at play. To be sure, even in the act of describing the problems with Western bias for the purposes of this paper, it takes a concerted effort not to slip into the very same traps. It is not essential, nor is it possible, to divorce language from its connotations. It is important, however, to realize that biases are pervasive and to be mindful of the subtle biases implied by language.

### Cataloging and Classification

Some scholars believe that categories used as labels discursively enact the prevailing social reality of a given culture. University of Maryland Professor, Richard Brown suggests, “Membership categories are not discovered as manifestations of a predefined social reality, but are apprehended in and through the very process by which they are deployed.”<sup>6</sup> Brown goes on to explain the ways in which categories and categorization are part and parcel of the enactment of power and thus he provides a means of understanding the hegemony of epistemological systems. A more concrete example of the phenomenon Brown describes, especially as it impacts identity and labeling, is found in Latino cultural discourse concerning sexual activity.

The term “homosexual” means different things to different people. In Latino culture, there is an important difference between a “homosexual” man and a “man who has sex with men.” While the terms commonly seem to be one and the same, for many Latinos “homosexual” refers more to a “sissy” or a “girly” man rather than to a man who exclusively has sexual intercourse with other men. The description of HIV/AIDS risk factors has caused many Latinos called “homosexual” to miss the message because of the terms being lost in cultural idioms.<sup>7</sup> Not only does this approach not take into account the social realities of a different cul-

ture, but a fundamental flaw in logic plagues it as well. Because risk factors for HIV/AIDS was limited to people described as homosexual, in Latino culture that population was deemed to be at risk though they may have not been "homosexual" by their understanding.<sup>8</sup> By the same token, for Latinos not identifying themselves as "homosexual," but who by a stricter definition "engage in sex with other men" reinforced the notion that they were not likely to get the disease. Clearly, this was not the intended message of the outreach program described by Schiller. The message of prevention for both groups is lost because the categories and labels have local meanings. Labels are not neutral or universal as they may seem to be at first glance.

Categories are part of the librarian's stock-and-trade. Librarians routinely use systems of classification that are essential both to cataloging and to retrieving information. Using classifications and applying categories require that librarians, perhaps more than any other group, be especially sensitive to the inherent power that categorization wields. The *de facto* manner in which these systems control access to knowledge is evidence of the deep entanglement of categorization with structures of power and dominance. The Library of Congress Classification (LCC) and the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) are two systems that have had a profound effect on knowledge classification and access to information in the United States and abroad. The dominance of America, both in publishing and its pervasive economic and cultural hegemony, has led to widespread adoption of these systems.<sup>9</sup>

There are some problems inherent in using the LCC and LCSH (or any other American library classification system) abroad as librarians like Sanford Berman and others have pointed out.<sup>10</sup> One problem is that the use of these systems promotes a Western-focused worldview, a problem that circumvents or negates the perspectives of other cultures.<sup>11</sup> For example, in the case of historical materials, information generally is clas-

sified from an American perspective. This classification limits the scope of information returned in a search query, especially for patrons using search terms specific to their cultures. A case in point: using a term like "Revolutionary War" is far more likely to return entries on America's bid for independence from the English in the eighteenth century than, say, Cuba's bid for independence from Spain in the nineteenth century even though both cultures refer to these events as "revolutionary". What LCC and LCSH promote is an American interpretation of history through classification and search terms. Countries that employ the LC systems without modification suffer diminished public access to their collections if researchers use local vernaculars.

Edward McKennon, a college librarian in Arizona, describes a particular problem in Mexico when LC systems were adopted to provide access to materials on the US-Mexican War.<sup>12</sup> While the catalogers used the LC systems for their OPACs, they also included more "home-grown" search terms in anticipation of different terms being used locally. The librarians who worked on adapting the LC headings to fit the US-Mexican War collection made great strides toward incorporating both perspectives – the search terms from the LC as well as some terms created to fit a more Mexican or Spanish approach. Unfortunately, this effort ended up splitting the collection and ultimately access has been hindered. The reason, in part, is that the terms created to supplement the LC systems and to make them more appropriate to the Spanish-speaking culture of Mexico have turned out to be inconsistent with the rules governing the creation of terms used in the LC systems. As a result, the Mexican search terms do not enjoy the same level of legitimacy than do the LC terms. The level of access afforded by the LC systems, and conversely denied to a more Mexico-centered approach, presents not only a problem in accessing the material, but also makes manifest the hegemonic underpinnings of such systems.<sup>13</sup> Intentional or not, the very act of importing the LC systems and then grafting on indigenous terms

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gives pride of place to the American system and automatically puts it in a position of power that de-centers and “otherizes” the epistemologies of non-American users.

Even when adapting an established codified system of classification within the same language and culture, similar power struggles and marginalization can occur. The Visual Resources Association is an organization of image management professionals with a membership base that is primarily American. Members outside the United States are from Canada, England, and Australia, which means that work within the organization tends to be English-centered. Although its projects have been funded many times and across many years, attempts on the part of the visual resources librarians to adapt a classification system based on Dublin Core, a cross-domain digital resource description, but with specifications for art and architecture, have not come to full fruition. The system currently undergoing design and redesign is known as VRA Core 4.0. In this case, language is not a barrier, nor is finding a system upon which to base the new cataloging. The main difficulty is in coming up with reliable, immutable terms that consistently fit cultural items (art, architecture, and the like). When a sub-group of the committee tasked with creating this classification system comes up with a term for a particular aspect of visual culture, it is probable that others of the committee will take exception to it, usually due to the potentially “culturally loaded” nature of the term. One may question, for example, whether it is more culturally sensitive to use the term “architecture,” “buildings,” or “thatched huts” to describe the dwelling structures in the Pacific Islander cultures. If such issues occur in the same or closely related cultures, then it is not surprising that tensions and controversies arise when applying classification systems across cultures.

The LC systems are problematic because they limit the information that individuals from cultures outside America can retrieve. Even for some Americans, LC search terms are not always immediately obvious, but in

other cultures the terms are often obscure to the point of being useless. Time and cost tend to exacerbate the problem. As is the case with the Visual Resources Association and its attempts to create a culturally appropriate set of terms for cataloging and classifying visual culture, such efforts often take years and large amounts of funding. These are some main reasons other countries and cultures cannot undertake the creation of more culturally appropriate classification systems. A survey of libraries in Mexico found that not only is there a lack of funding for such projects, there are also very few library workers who have the training to undertake a redesign of any existing classification system.<sup>14</sup> Such a project would not be possible, both in terms of its monetary cost and its potential cost to the library staff, which is, itself, a form of economic hegemony that supports the intellectual domination represented in the LC systems. Beyond the problems with intellectual hegemony, it would be economically untenable if libraries in other countries not only had to utilize the LC systems, but then also had to employ American-trained librarians in order to implement a system that truly works.

Arguably, employing the LCC in other countries has its advantages even though it is problematic at its core. Many libraries in other nations realize that if they want others to respect and access the collections in their libraries, they must have their materials cataloged in a widely accepted system. LCC has the advantage of being an internationally recognized, codified system; this encourages institutions in other nations simply to adopt it as opposed to trying to alter it to better fit the specific needs of their culture.<sup>15</sup> Understanding the power of using the “American system” for cataloging, and yet utilizing it even when it does not fit the needs of another culture, attests to the hegemony of America in the field of library science. On a wide scale LC systems have become the benchmark against which the legitimacy of a society’s modes of thinking and categorization are judged.

For “developing” nations in Africa, the financial and international pressures to adopt pre-existing systems like the LC systems are particularly strong and no less problematic. Currently, many African libraries are not attempting to be on the competitive edge for collection acquisition as much as they are trying merely to get information to their citizens. This is true especially for libraries handling HIV/AIDS resources. The future of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the African continent largely depends upon the level of awareness and knowledge possessed by the people of Africa.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the classification system used is not as important as getting the needed information to the people whose lives may depend on it. This tradeoff, however, is not without its problems. The process of making information available, no matter how well intentioned, is susceptible to power imbalances.

The experience of Jane Kinney Meyers with the Lubuto Library Project in Zambia may illustrate how Western thinking and resources dominate library development, at least in its early stages, but the Project also illustrates ways in which Western hegemonic thinking could be overcome. During the early stages of the project, English language materials were the dominant, and for the most part, the only types of resources available. While the English language materials served a purpose early on, a goal of the project now is to collect materials in Zambian languages.<sup>17</sup> This will help mitigate the dominance of Western thinking and knowledge and express in much better ways (such as through biography rather than scientific writing, perhaps) knowledge of HIV/AIDS. While it may not be easy nor economically feasible to develop library services in culturally sensitive ways, at least Meyers and her organization understands its importance. Meyers says, “When you’re working with other cultures ... you start with the essences of what a special librarian is and then learn what you need to learn about the culture or the specific situation and apply to that. I think special librarians are the ones equipped to work internationally because we are very creative and very,

very open.”<sup>18</sup> In describing the Project, perhaps Meyer’s “special classification scheme” used to provide access to the print materials of the libraries of the Lubuto Library Project will concretely reflect this openness and sensitivity. Human lives are threatened by HIV/AIDS and time is critical. Since people receiving the information must have it in a way they can understand and accept, the problems of categorization take on an even greater significance.

### Information Control

If information is key to slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS, one problem, mentioned earlier, is that many of the information sources are written in English. Part of the reason for this is that there are not many publishing houses in Africa and, consequently, there is not an abundance of materials written in any of the indigenous African languages. Given that HIV/AIDS information resources in these languages are limited, either African library patrons have to know how to read English or these resources have to be translated, a process fraught with many difficulties. On reflection, Meyers’ sub-Saharan library project in its early stages shows something of the nature of such problems.

The sub-Saharan library project in its initial phase included a base collection of books that are well-known classics from an assortment of different cultures, but primarily from America. In order to augment this base English language collection, children involved in the Lubuto Library Project were asked to create their own narratives by transcribing into their native languages what is read to them in English during story time.<sup>19</sup> While this may have been helpful for the Project in some instances, great care has to be used and the local cultures need to be understood so that translation can be most effective and that offense not be given. For example, what might result in translating E.B. White’s classic story, *Charlotte’s Web*? It is a story of friendship, learning, and life enjoyed by children in America and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Wil-

bur, a pig, is the protagonist whose life experiences form the basis for the message White conveys. While the story seems innocent and enjoyable from an American perspective, it is all too easy to forget that in Africa where Islam is a major religion of many countries, the pig is an unclean beast according to Islamic law. If this tale was one for translation by African children, for example, a librarian may unwittingly challenge – and offend – the belief structures of the people she is trying to serve.

In addition to the problems of the predominance of English language materials and of translation, other related problems exist. First, as Professor Stephen Mutula of the Department of Library and Information Studies, University of Botswana, points out, African agencies that obtain and depend on American and other foreign resources and systems of support would do better if greater attention is given to local concerns and needs rather than a wholesale adoption of foreign models of development.<sup>20</sup> I suggest, accordingly, that not only should the resources be assembled and made available in culturally sensitive ways in Africa, but the very models of development, whenever possible, need to arise from the cultures of Africa itself. Second, the incongruence of African and non-African programs and models of development can also be traced, as sociologists Paul Kay and Willett Kempton argue, to the difference in the structure and use of language and the production and applicability of ideas. As a corollary, African programs and development best serve the African population when the indigenous languages as well as thought structures – and their nuanced meanings – are in harmony.<sup>21</sup> Third, there is the more practical, concrete problem of providing African libraries with “cast-offs” from the West. While, generally, “cast-offs” are better than nothing, and in the case of the Lubuto Library Project they really got the program started, if not handled sensitively, this approach could also send the unhappy message that the recipients of second-hand or weeded materials are really second-class people. Again, it should be stressed, that while

projects often get started with a “lot of heart,” a little budget, and a whole lot of donated time and materials, the objectives and goals of such projects, in order to mitigate hegemonic presuppositions, attitudes and programs, ought to move as quickly as possible to culturally appropriate, home-grown, and autonomous programs and solutions. Thankfully, this seems to be occurring with the Lubuto Library Project.

### **Part Two: The Librarian’s Role in the HIV/AIDS Crisis in Africa**

Given this understanding of the problem of Western hegemony, the role of the librarian activist, nonetheless, can be significant in helping to address and ameliorate the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa.

#### **Assessing the Literature**

A first advantage activist librarians can bring to the issue is their skill in assessing different types of literature. To be sure, different types of literature require different sensitivities and levels of care. Classic tales and children’s storybooks can offer insights into the human condition that withstand the test of time despite their cultural specificity. This, however, is not the case with scientific or medical information dealing with HIV/AIDS. Library Science Professor, Anita Ondrusek, emphasizes the critical importance of making informed decisions about book selection, retention, and de-selection based on the timeline of rapid changes in HIV/AIDS information.<sup>22</sup> Scientists have been publishing on the subject of HIV/AIDS for twenty-eight years. Taking into account how quickly and vastly the information can change on a month-to-month basis, it is critical to evaluate any HIV/AIDS collection by the standard of currency. If America is sending older books to Africa to establish libraries, and the books containing information on HIV/AIDS are out of date and potentially incorrect, it will not help those seeking and needing the most current information. Moreover, these materials could actually be detrimental, particularly if the information once considered to be factually



correct has been subsequently disproved or improved by a more recent study. It is the responsibility of the librarian to obtain current information.<sup>23</sup>

### Collaboration

The task of keeping library materials up to date on HIV/AIDS is daunting even for a specially trained science or medical librarian. Imagine how much more challenging it is for a librarian not specifically trained in medical collection materials. Since most librarians do not have degrees in medicine, nor are they healthcare workers, it is that much more important to establish collaborative relationships with the professionals in the field. Specifically, in order to provide current information about HIV/AIDS and to help develop the collection of materials available on the topic in Africa, it is necessary to partner with community groups.<sup>24</sup> While librarians cannot necessarily be expected to have a wealth of specialist-level knowledge about HIV/AIDS, they can utilize their skills in information searching and retrieval to find the most current information from those who do. They can then disseminate the correct information to enhance HIV/AIDS awareness in the region. Carrying out these services most effectively, despite the paucity of up-to-date information available on the subject in Africa, information seeking and retrieval in a network environment helps the librarian serve communities in the best ways possible. Again, it cannot be overstressed, understanding the specific needs of a particular community, and how to best meet those needs, falls under the purview of the librarian, and this is best accomplished through collaboration.

### Reaching the Audience

Once the needs of the region are understood and the needed partnerships established, the next task is to reach the members of the community in a way that is culturally respectful and appropriate. Touched on earlier in this paper, one of the recurrent problems is that Western activist librarians often tend to take a non-African approach to their me-

thod of disseminating HIV/AIDS information to people in Africa.<sup>25</sup> This can result in a disconnection between the resources and the audience that needs them. Wambui Wagacha, Head of Library Division, Kenyan Institute of Public Policy, Research and Analysis, explained in a presentation at the IFLA Conference in 2005 that since women's issues, including sexuality and issues surrounding HIV/AIDS, are taboo subjects in many African cultures, much of the important information about transmission and prevention misses the audience that is desperate for the knowledge needed for protection and survival.<sup>26</sup> However, librarians can be very creative in overcoming such barriers.

Some scholars have criticized librarians in Africa for cataloging, conserving, and preserving the books they already have instead of actively developing the materials by repackaging them for easier mass consumption. Such repackaging efforts use storytelling as a powerful and culturally specific mode of communication.<sup>27</sup> Library and information centers on the African continent will work more effectively if they take into account the oral/aural preferences of many African peoples and acknowledge and utilize the privileged status afforded elders, as is the case in most communities. If elders and respected members of the community can be educated about HIV/AIDS and taught effective ways to re-present the information to the public, then another helpful resource will be created to increase the accuracy and availability of the information reaching the population and to decrease the misinformation caused by outdated sources, transcriptions, or cross-cultural misunderstandings.<sup>28</sup> Studies have demonstrated the importance of elders and friends in providing HIV/AIDS awareness, particularly in rural areas in Africa.<sup>29</sup> If elders have been educated about HIV/AIDS, it allows for an easier and more effective dissemination of information. Accordingly, the common African cultural value of learning from community elders and family through extended conversations is not replaced by an unfamiliar Western-style classroom or workshop setting. When it comes to the

issue of reaching people in rural areas, community libraries provide a workable alternative to the American-centered institution because they are developed through community participation and not created on the sole basis of outsider opinions.<sup>30</sup>

### Library Architecture

In addition to the person-to-person strategies for encouraging HIV/AIDS information dissemination, the library's physical space for so doing is also important. It is commonly believed that physical designs and shapes of buildings are reflections, to some extent, of values and cultures. When Jane Meyers embarked on her first library project in Africa, she started with a twenty foot shipping container.<sup>31</sup> This makeshift library was, in various ways, foreign and did not match the indigenous architecture of the region. Essentially, it was a rectangular box functioning as a "book trailer" in the middle of a region more accustomed to "hut-like" structures.

For purposes of illustration of how buildings evoke certain perceptions and prejudices, in America some may think of trailers as inferior dwellings used by the lower class. The term, "trailer trash" reflects the negative associations with this type of structure. From the experience of Hurricane Katrina, many are reminded of the emotional pain associated with the use of trailers as makeshift rescue shelters. Since physical space communicates subtle cues about values, need, class, social development, and so forth, it is important to create structures familiar to, and which promote and elevate, the community being served. Such familiarity encourages trust and this trust promotes interest which can lead to better use of the buildings and resources they offer.

This certainly became Meyers' understanding as the Lubuto Library Project developed. Admittedly, the perception of "the trailer" in America likely is different than an African perception, but there *were* problems with the shipping container used by Meyers. To overcome the local residents' reluctance to

enter the container, she changed her library design from the container to round-walled buildings with cone-shaped roofs that reflected local, indigenous architecture. Community members related to these structures as places belonging to the region and were more likely to visit the library. This was a significant development. As more accurate and culturally appropriate information about HIV/AIDS is delivered from venues more accepted and embraced by a community, information about HIV/AIDS can more readily have the desired effect of stemming the tide of this scourge in Africa.

### Appropriate Questions and Answers

Once there is an adequate and culturally appropriate location where community members can meet, and once activist librarians are best prepared to collect, process and disseminate information in ways that avoid the pitfalls of hegemonic thinking, the next step involves encouraging questions and answering these questions in a way that best satisfies the curiosity and information needs of the enquirers. Where such questions relate to HIV/AIDS, the question and answer interchange takes on added challenges. In the United States, reference librarians are routinely asked a wide assortment of questions pertaining to this disease. These questions range from in-depth scientific queries to matters that invariably disclose elements of personal behavior.<sup>32</sup> To be sure, HIV/AIDS intersects many aspects of life, culture, and behavior. In African cultures, especially for women, there is the added dimension of particular taboos which can limit or hinder the inclination to ask questions.

Different groups seek information in different ways.<sup>33</sup> As a result, responses to these questions require different approaches for each type of group. For some groups, a "fear-based" model may be appropriate where fear elicits a change in behavior.<sup>34</sup> Related to the HIV/AIDS crisis then, the horrors of infection may frighten some people into changing their behavior and cause them to seek further education about

modes of disease prevention. This strategy, however, is less likely to work for teenagers who often feel that they are invincible. Understanding the situation in Africa, providing information about HIV/AIDS is further limited since issues regarding sexual health and sexually transmitted disease are considered "female problems." The ways that educators and informational materials address HIV/AIDS must not only take into account the age of the audience but also the gender and the socialization patterns of males and females in each community.

A good example of balancing these types of needs comes from the scholarship on the transmission of HIV/AIDS information among Hispanic populations. For Latina women, the family is a more important consideration than that of herself as an individual.<sup>35</sup> The emphasis on "family first" in Hispanic cultures is an important aspect for the library to consider if it is to reach out to members of the community. In order to encourage Hispanic patrons of all ages to visit the library, the library must target the family as a whole. A Latina, for example, would unlikely attend an ESL (English as a Second Language) library-based course focused on the information available on HIV/AIDS because, to her, that is time she should be spending with her family. Given typical socialization patterns in the Latino community, women are more likely to regard quantity and quality time at home as the essence of good motherhood. If, however, the ESL class is presented to her in a way that includes her family and makes her confident that the information gleaned may protect the entire family from contracting HIV/AIDS she may be much more willing to attend the class.<sup>36</sup>

In short, the activist librarian's role in collecting, processing and disseminating information on HIV/AIDS in Africa is significant. While there are pitfalls to be aware of, especially coming from a Western culture with its tendencies toward hegemony, the librarian can transcend these tendencies by carrying out activities of the profession with understanding and sensitivity to African

cultures and needs, and by truly collaborating, rather than dominating, the communities served by activist librarians.

### Conclusion

The goal of activist librarians considered in this paper is laudable – to provide the best information about HIV/AIDS in ways that reach those most in need and which helps to end the scourge of the disease in Africa. It should not be the librarian's goal to change the deeply ingrained cultural traits of a region or the people who live there, nor should it be the librarian's objective to import a foreign set of cultural norms and mores. Instead, it is the duty of the librarian to organize, repack, and disseminate HIV/AIDS information so that it stands the highest possible chance of appealing to the recipient's own knowledge structures and epistemological patterns. Unfortunately, cultural hegemony often operates invisibly, and those who are part of a "dominant" or "dominating" culture can be unaware of its pervasive influences. In America, such largely unexamined assumptions of "superiority" tend to result in a bias that the West has the only correct method for collecting and disseminating information. The effect of this is detrimental to the people and cultures most lacking the materials to protect themselves. Africa is in desperate need of information but as long as librarians employ only American ideas, categories, and sensibilities, their effect is limited, if not harmful. It is an unhappy trade-off indeed if the end of the epidemic of HIV/AIDS in Africa is at the price of cultural destruction or intellectual subjugation of the indigenous populations. Library activists from the West must be comfortable with relinquishing assumptions and influences that are, or tend to be, hegemonic. Improvements and developments in Africa should be promoted and measured in ways that are culturally sensitive, and as much as possible, "home-grown." If this occurs, perhaps the subjugation and paternalism spoken of by John Locke can be avoided.

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