

## **Progressive African Library & Information Activists' Group (PALIAct )**

The African Progressive Librarians' Group (PALIAct) is an initiative of a group of progressive African librarians and information workers. We recognise that current "leaders" in the African information field have done little to break the colonial and imperialist policies and practices in meeting the information needs of working people in Africa, or to make the profession more relevant to the needs of African librarians and information workers. We have therefore decided to take the initiative to set up an alternative organisation

*the Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group - PALIAct.*

PALIAct will provide a new vision to help create a people-orientated information service that can meet the information needs of workers and peasants. It will work towards providing an anti-imperialist and a Pan African world outlook among African librarians and information workers. It will also seek to set up alternative information service in partnership with the potential users of the service as a way of showing what our "official" libraries and information workers should be doing. PALIAct will form partnerships with progressive information and other workers within Africa and overseas.

The Project will bring together the resources, skills, and labour of those who accept its vision for a relevant information service, based on the principles of equality, equity, social justice, and democracy.

*The PALIAct Vision* To develop a people-oriented information service run and managed by/on behalf of workers, peasants, pastoralists, fisher people and other

marginalised individuals and groups whose information needs have not been met. The new service will be based on equality for all African nationalities, for women, disabled people, classes, ...

*The PALIAct Stand* PALIACT recognises the right to relevant information as a basic human right. This right must be enshrined in the constitution of all African Countries and be endorsed as an active programme by the African Union.

The struggle for a relevant information service is intimately linked with the political struggles of the people for organising a society that ensures that material, social, cultural and political needs of the people are met. PALIAct believes that the opportunity for making fundamental changes created as a direct result of political victories in the early period of struggle for liberation was lost. The opportunity that history had brought to our doorsteps to provide a people-orientated information service was lost. Instead of challenging the very basis on which library

and information services were built, we allowed ourselves to be manipulated into making merely quantitative changes in library services, but failed to make any qualitative changes. The classes who were served by the colonial library service continued to be served and the needs of working people who had always remained outside the remit of such services remained unmet. Their experiences, their cultures, their very language remained outside the walls of impressive library buildings. Thus the advantage gained in the early period of struggle for a society and an information system which served the needs of all its people was lost. The struggle for such an information service continues to date.

As an example, information about lives, thoughts and achievements of African heroes such as Cabral, Kimaathi, Lumumba, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Pinto, to name a few, is hardly known or taught in African schools and Universities. Few African libraries collect works about or by them. In this respect, African information workers have not served their communities well.

The PALIAct programme is therefore an activist agenda to ensure that the information rights of African people is recognised in theory as well as in practice. While PALIAct struggles to ensure that this right is restored to the people of Africa, it will set up pilot projects to develop ideas and practices that will guide its programme to ensure the ultimate creation of a people-orientated information service.

*The PALIAct principles* In its commitment to developing a people-orientated information service, PALIAct is committed to:

The principles of social justice, equality, equity, human welfare, and the development of cultural and social democracy; thus we shall actively address historical inequalities in the information field in Africa; Achieving

equality of access to and inclusiveness of information services, especially extending such services to the workers, peasants and the poor, the marginalized and those who have been discriminated against; The provision of a relevant service to those active in the struggles for social justice and who are working towards the creation of a liberated Africa; Supporting the collection, organization, preservation and dissemination of the documents of people's struggles in all forms and languages; Making available alternative materials representing a wide range of progressive viewpoints from within Africa and overseas and which are often excluded by traditional libraries, mass media and educational and information systems; Encouraging the exploration of alternative models of services; promoting and disseminating critical analysis of information technology's impact on libraries and societies; and support the fundamental democratization of existing institutions of education, culture, communications; Undertaking joint, interdisciplinary research into fundamental library issues (e.g. into the political economy of information in the age of neo-liberalism and corporate globalization) in order to lay the basis for effective action in our spheres of work; Investigating and organizing efforts to make the library-as-workplace more democratic and encourage resistance to the managerialism of the present library culture; Promoting international solidarity among librarians and cooperation between libraries across borders on the basis of our joint commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related covenants which create a democratic framework for constructive cooperative endeavours; Organizing in partnership with other activists in the cultural and educational fields, to help put issues of social responsibility on the agendas of international bodies such as IFLA and UNESCO; Opposing corporate

globalization which, despite its claims, reinforces existing social, economic, cultural inequalities, and working towards the creation of a democratic globalism and internationalism which respects and cultivates cultural plurality, which recognizes the sovereignty of peoples, which acknowledges the obligations of society to the individual and communities, and which prioritizes human values and needs over profits.

**Membership** Membership of PALIACT is open to all who agree with the Vision and Principles of PALIACT, and agree to contribute their labour, skills or other resources to the Project.

**Programme of activities** Short term: Set up a core group of APLA activists to launch the Group. Each group to initiate a pilot project based on PALIACT principles, on voluntary basis or from funds provided by friendly

organisations. Activities to raise funds would be a good starting point, e.g. film shows. Collect and disseminate relevant progressive material in the information field from a working class point of view. Influence syllabi and teaching programmes in African Universities teaching information studies so as to reflect African, anti-imperialist and working class point of view and sources in their teaching programmes. Actively recruit members for PALIACT from African libraries and Universities. Set up of a web presence for PALIACT. Set up a discussion board to get views on the future of PALIACT from progressive librarians in Africa; invite support from outside Africa once an African-based group is established. Seek financial support for PALIACT to carry out its work, e.g. UNESCO, IFLA, COMLA and progressive librarians group in other countries.

**Shiraz Durrani 19 February 2005**

The following story depicts the information scene in Africa, the situation that PALIACT is attempting to change:

### **Will Nyanjiru be silenced?**

*from "Libraries and rural development", University of Nairobi Library Magazine, No.4,1980.*

Nyanjiru wakes up at 4 am; a water debe on her head, she walks for an hour and a half to the nearest stream. Then she climbs back from the river to her home, picking up dry wood on the way for fire; she arrives home three hours later to start the day's other work: crying children to be calmed with bits of left over food, chicken to be fed and watered ; then to start digging her half acre shamba in the hot, burning sun. This is the daily routine for a peasant.

**And this is the life of a modern librarian:** Kamau pats his dogs fondly as they surround his new Volvo. This is his daily ritual. He realises that the gates are not open yet and hoots loudly. Where is Mutua? Does he not know that today is the library board meeting

and he has to report early? They are to discuss library regulations and he has prepared a long list of don'ts that users should adhere to. As Mutua opens the gates, Kamau speeds out, the silent noise of the Volvo soothing his mind. He starts thinking about library rules. Yes, users must be controlled. Only last week he found a fellow eating mandazi in the library. How can that be allowed? Kamau had him thrown out. The first rule is going to be about eating in the library. And then of course "Silence": "Silence in the library":

Kamau feels happy as he enters the library parking. "Silence Please": "Silence in the Library"; "No eating in the library"; "American Library Association Rules for

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Filing catalogue cards"; "Anglo-American Cataloguing System" ... In such an atmosphere of threats, admonitions, foreign terminology and practices lives and works the modern librarian. Inside the stone walls of the library, in total peace and calm among the well-preserved volumes, he is oblivious to the ruin and chaos of hunger, starvation and mass exploitation outside.

The contrasting lives of Nyanjiru and Kamau can be found in any Majority World country. Their activities are taking place within miles of each other and on the same day. Yet the two are so removed from each other that they may easily be on different planets or in different historical ages.

The library is a concrete structure inaccessible to Nyanjiru, and Nyanjiru as a library user is unacceptable to the librarians. For Nyanjiru there is no time to waste, no compromises to be made. All her labour and thoughts are to satisfy her family's basic material needs: food, clothing and shelter. Anything that helps her in this work, she accepts with open arms and mind. Anything that prevents her from acquiring what she needs, she will fight. Her information needs are clear - she wants information which will help her to produce and protect her material

requirements.

On the other hand lies the library service - set up and maintained through 'assistance' from a colonial, neo-colonial 'mother' country. A mother whose very touch brings death. "Silence Please, Silence in the Library':

Silence, in spite of Nyanjiru's dying children; silence, in spite of Nyanjiru's twenty-four hour working day; silence, even though Nyanjiru's labours fill up the stomachs of "ladies and gentlemen" thousands of miles away, while her own stomach remains empty.

Thus it is not surprising that Nyanjiru knows no library, and no library knows Nyanjiru. The world of Nyanjiru and the world of library services as they exist today are far apart. Libraries based on traditions of foreign information practices cannot serve the needs of people like Nyanjiru.

Nyanjiru belongs to her own people's information system based on the oral tradition and experiences of history which she can understand, trust and apply in order to fight for her existence.

**Shiraz Durrani**