

ADVOCATING THE ROLE & WORTH OF LANGUAGES & CULTURES SPECIALIST LIBRARIANS

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The worth of languages & cultures specialist librarians.

Transmission of knowledge does not happen in a vacuum, neatly sauntering centuries, continents and languages. When it comes to Middle Eastern studies, while many academic studies focus on the contents of the knowledge transmitted, I found that the study of the material culture associated with this transmission of knowledge has consistently attracted less attention. This is changing and I cannot recommend enough the works of Konrad Hirschler¹ and Olly Ackermann² in that direction.

It is interesting to note that these studies have turned seemingly quite naturally to the study of the libraries, their catalogues and their custodians. While translation was the principal factor of transmission of philosophical knowledge for example from Greek to Arabic via Syriac in the medieval ages in the Middle East, these works of translation did not only exist in scholars' private collections of books. They more often than not were copied and stored and shared in larger physical units, commonly called libraries.

Now, libraries are not - as many modern management executives seem to believe – simple warehouses of books, where items are passively accumulated, and where librarians' sole function is to weed to make sure the (spontaneously acquired?) collections fit in their allocated space. There are a few librarianship studies describing the essential role played by libraries in preserving and promoting indigenous languages and cultures in various parts of the globe³, though interestingly, many of them present libraries in a rather disembodied way, referring to libraries, when they really are talking about flesh-and-blood *librarians*. Libraries indeed only come to be by the presence of librarians. It seems quite a tautology, but it surprisingly appears more controversial than it is in Higher Education management teams.

A scholar of Central Asia once told me of her experience of stumbling on a room at the University in Tashkent, crammed with books that had not been handled in more than forty years and had belonged to a long-retired prominent academic. This was not a library: it was a room full of books. No-one knew about these books, no-one had catalogued them and made them visible to the outer world.

I propose to take this collection of books as a working example. Those long-forgotten books included

¹ Hirschler, K., 2016. *Medieval Damascus: Plurality and diversity in an Arabic library: the Ashrafiya library catalogue*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

² Akkerman, O. (2019). Secret Archives and Sacred Texts in Gujarat. [online] Ottomanhistorypodcast.com. Episode 394 with Olly Akkerman, hosted by Nir Shafir. Available at: <http://www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2018/12/secretarchives.html> [Accessed 16 Sep. 2019].

³ Thorpe, K. and Galassi, M. (2014) 'Rediscovering Indigenous Languages: The Role and Impact of Libraries and Archives in Cultural Revitalisation', *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 45(2), pp. 81–100.
Cooper, D. (2008) 'Sustaining Language Diversity: The Role of Public Libraries', *APLIS*, 21(1), pp. 28–32.
Hadi, A. C. S. (1996) 'The role of Irian Jaya libraries in preserving indigenous languages: issues and problems', pp. 83–94.

many titles in Russian, Turkish and Kazakh, some in Arabic, Persian, a few more in Uzbek, Tajik and Mongolian. How would one start to bring these books to the light of day and useful again, as a link in the chain of knowledge transmission between Central Asian scholarship and the rest of the world? What would be the most effective way to do so?

The answer is deceptively simple: bring in a librarian. But not any librarian: a librarian with knowledge of Central Asia culture and history, and who masters at least two or more of the languages represented in that collection. A librarian who would be able to:

- 1) map out the collection by cataloguing all the books to accepted professional standards;
- 2) enter them in a database using an interoperable format;
- 3) enter the records of the books in their original script;
- 4) organise the collection by attributing subject headings and ascribing a classification number;
- 5) when unable to do any of the above, seek out targeted help by drawing in their connections with fellow librarians and academics specialising in said topics and languages;
- 6) physically arrange the collection so it becomes more accessible and visible;
- 7) teach academics and students of said university about the existence of that collection;
- 8) engage with other library, academic or Digital Humanities projects that might make use of such collection.

Does it sound a bit like a rather heavy task-list? It is only a partial aspect of the routine job of the **languages and cultures specialist academic librarians**. This does not include for example their further roles in selecting and organising (sometimes designing) electronic resources relevant to the languages and cultures of our areas of expertise.

That is what we do, and by doing so, we are very much part of this chain of transmission of knowledge. We are the dragomans of late that interpret the reality from one culture and language to another. Our cultural and linguistic knowledge (and for some of us downright expertise) pave the road for communication and knowledge to flow through.

In that respect, we have a social responsibility as well in the decolonising of knowledge, as we are the ones sourcing and making accessible the material that let the voices of the lesser-studied, the colonised and ignored pierce through the mind-limiting fog of colonial mindset and cultural hegemony.

Simply because we usually promote other people's research outputs instead of our own and barely get any of the limelight when these research outputs get published, does not diminish the importance of our role in this chain.

However, it is a sad statement that the work and worth of language specialist librarians are obviously not acknowledged and appreciated at their just value, and consequently not allowed to be used most fully and effectively, threatening their very existence and hence weakening this chain of knowledge transmission.

How has this state of affairs come to be? Why this devaluation of this crucial function?

We have been talking a lot about what defines our roles, in the context of the increasing and mounting threat to them. Our roles have been **de-professionalised** and **depreciated** (systematic downgrading in all parts of UK [such as at SOAS University of London earlier this year], Europe and I believe the US as well, dilution with other subjects responsibilities [see the restructuring that happened in Manchester and Leeds University Libraries], or even erasure of the role [as it happened at the University of Exeter]). An overview of this deteriorating situation can be had from Waseem Farooq's paper presented at the 41st

MELCom International Annual Conference in June 2019: "[Changing Management Structures : the impact on subject specialists, and how to remain relevant⁴](#)".

This was allowed to happen because among other things there is no-one to advocate for us, show our worth, and define a strong benchmark, so when it comes to recruit us, there is more often than not, no-one on the recruiting panel able to judge our worth and experience in an informed way. We need to try and remedy to this, by rising the profile of our jobs, inform better on what we do (and do not do, like being fluent native speakers in the hundreds of languages and dialects that those vast regions cover!).

In a bid to reduce costs, expert and experienced librarians were replaced by very junior ones in many institutions, without giving them the benefit of a proper mentorship and training, and usually depriving them from any support (such as cataloguing assistants for various languages they do not master). A lot of institutional memory and professional expertise were lost that way.

This shift also fed even more the phenomenon of hidden labour, as librarians are more often than not driven by strong work ethics, steeped in the desire to serve and promote the study of the region and/or topic they support. We develop our collections and offer specialist information tuitions, and will go to all sort of lengths to keep up with our fellow librarians who do not face these extra linguistic and cultural demands (such as for example liaising with vendors or academics or students to insure we obtain material from regions and countries from where it is notoriously difficult to do so, such as Central Asia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, etc.).

Ultimately, the depreciation of our jobs will lead to the weakening of that link in the transmission of knowledge, with all its corollaries: the decline of intellectual curiosity and academic rigor, the advance of ignorance and narrow-mindedness, the domination of fake news, the rise of the blind fear of the Other that disguise in all shapes of fascisms.

I do believe we need to take action to prevent this from happening. We owe it not only to ourselves, but to all our hard-working, dedicated, passionate colleagues who share the same professional values, which are amongst the noblest: diffusing knowledge, defending freedom of expression and freedom of research, supporting and stimulating intellectual curiosity by providing access to various sources. We may not seemingly and literally save lives, but who amongst us had not heard at least once in the course of their working life: "You literally saved my life?" when helping someone getting the crucial information they needed to ace that essay that will insure their access to the university of their choice, that paper article that would kick-start their academic career or that all important grant application?

Accepting the importance of our role is key to make others in managerial positions accept it as well. Humility is one of the most commonly shared trait amongst librarians, but that should not translate as acceptance of the lack of consideration for our profession.

So what can we do?

This being but a short intervention at a professional association business meeting, designed to spur reflection on the matter, it will not go in any detailed work plan. Instead, here are a few suggestions of the directions we might want to explore to try and resolve the crisis that our profession is facing. It is by no means an exhaustive list, and we only wish that it would spur further enquiry and lead ultimately to the design of a practical concerted action plan.

⁴ Farooq, W., 2019. Changing Management Structures: the impact on subject specialists, and how to remain relevant. In: *Papers of the 41st MELCom International Annual Conference*. [online] Available at: <http://www.melcominternational.org/wp-content/content/past_conf/2019/2019_papers/FAROOQ_2019.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2019].

- 1) Acknowledge individually what is our contribution to the state of teaching, learning and research in our specific (cultural and linguistic) field;
- 2) Link up with other national and international Language & Cultures Librarians Groups (MELCom Intl, SCOLMA, SAALG, SEALG, French libraries Group, etc.)
- 3) On the basis of the *IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers*⁵, develop a deontological code delineating the specific duties of language & culture specialist librarians that go beyond the core duties and competencies expected from non-language specialist librarians.
- 4) Have this deontological code certified by the relevant professional associations and made available for any potential employers to refer to when drawing up their job description and recruiting candidates.
- 5) Define a generic role description for languages and cultures specialist librarians (on the model perhaps of the job profile that graduate careers website such as *Prospects* advertise for academic librarians⁶), and have it appropriately graded by an analytical job evaluation scheme such as HERA (Higher Education Roles Analysis) for the UK, in order for Language & Cultures Librarians to get (in line with the supposed benefit of such process) :
 - an improved job design;
 - more suitably recruited and selected;
 - clarification on role expectations between managers and staff (it must be clear that language specialist librarians are not interpreters or translators per se for example!);
 - better managed – particularly by providing a framework for feedback and highlighting priority areas for training and development;
 - facilitated promotion and re-grading decisions;
 - a clearer career and succession planning.
- 6) Encourage academics and researchers to make visible their experience of libraries and archives – the excellent and the less good - in their research data and their acknowledgment. More and more are slowly starting to do so, and we cannot commend them enough for it. Archives and special collections are hardly truly “buried” and undiscovered, as often the headlines suggest. Aspect of the contents might have been, but if those academics could find them in the first instance, it is in most of the cases, because these archives and manuscripts had been catalogued and could be requested and consulted. It is crucial that this work and the people performing it are properly acknowledged.

Taking these steps would hopefully help to reaffirm the worth of the languages and cultures specialist librarians, and ultimately strengthen this chain of knowledge transmission that allow our societies to flourish academically and morally.

⁵ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (2019). *IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers (full version)*. [online] Available at:

<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11092> [Accessed 16 Sep. 2019].

⁶ Prospects (2019). *Academic librarian job profile* [online] Prospects.ac.uk. Available at: <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles/academic-librarian> [Accessed 16 Sep. 2019].