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Joanneke Elliott

African Studies and West European Studies Librarian

Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Email: joanneke@email.unc.edu

The 'decolonization' process: workflows and best practices for the collection of African materials and literature in American university libraries.

Abstract

There is a growing professional conversation about decolonizing the libraries, especially the archives. Library and archival collections on campus are core drivers of university knowledge production, a field notoriously complicit in colonial thinking and marginalization of African voices, universities, authors, and academics. Fortunately, recent anti-colonial discourses and practices have pushed the responsibility of librarians to create inclusive and de-colonial collections to the forefront of the profession. What types of practices, processes, and training can help drive this movement forward, increase representation and student engagement, while also acknowledging the profession's past mistakes.

This study aims to contribute to that effort by trying to better understand the ongoing efforts to decolonize university libraries across the United States and to establish a platform for sharing best practices among library professionals. The study is grounded in 8-10 interviews with African Studies librarians in university libraries in the United States and supplemented with a survey mechanism of more than 25 professionals.

Keywords

Decolonization, African studies, Academic libraries, Library collections

Introduction and background

So much of colonial power has flown through librarian's hands: dictionaries, encyclopedias, artifacts, policy proposals and most crucially, research, all have played their roll in oppressing and justifying domination at home and abroad. Library and archival collections are built on opinions and beliefs of Whites, and knowledge from or about the African continent came by way of explorers, missionaries, and colonizers. African indigenous voices and scholarship or literature in African languages were rarely part of library collections. Decolonizing African library collections is about recognizing the absence of African voices and acknowledging bias in early and contemporary acquisitions practices. There must be a commitment to purposefully collecting African scholarship and filling in the gaps of suppressed voices from the past. A deliberate attempt should be made to incorporate this scholarship into instruction, exhibits, programs, and events in the library to highlight African voices, research, and scholarship. These changes should be in support of faculty and student research and the departments it serves. Although we have begun to take steps in the right direction, working towards a de-colonized library system requires active efforts in teaching, collection development, and research support with an aim towards promoting student success, particularly students of color, first-generation students, and low-income students.

Discourse on decolonizing the library is connected to the ongoing conversation about decolonizing African studies at American academic institutions. In many of the universities in the United States, the study of Africa is located within the department of African and African American Studies. The researcher completely agrees with Christopher Clapham's (2020) skepticism that any significant intellectual connection exists between the study of Africa and that of people of African origin or the diaspora within the United States. "The sheer brutality of the dislocation that slavery imposed, and the massive differences between the societies from which Africans had been wrenched, and those into which they were then forcibly incorporated, were such as to destroy any meaningful connections between the two that could then be resuscitated at an academic level in the modern era" (Clapham, 2020, pp. 146). The legacy of slavery in the United States is so deeply embedded within the African American experience that it overpowers the legacy of colonialism and the experience of Africans within the continent (Clapham, 2020). As Clapham points out, this has very little to do with the experience of Africans within Africa or the history of the African continent but everything to do with the communities they moved to. As the popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement has increased, so have demands for Eurocentric curriculum reform, racial equity book discussions, and hiring practices that increase diversity. During the

past decade, there has been a directed effort to diversify collections making sure that different voices and opinions were heard, and different narratives were told.

The distinction between decolonization and diversification for the purpose of this research is that decolonization is the ongoing process of undoing, deconstructing, and reforming which according to Karabinos, 2019, “cannot be described in the past tense”. Crilly, 2019 and Damen, 2019 suggest one way of succeeding in this process is by contextualizing specific collections, single items, or exhibits. Dhillon (2020) argues that the university is not the appropriate setting for decolonization to take place because of their association in and with the violent legacy of colonialism. Universities are also neoliberal institutions, that without any real structural change in hierarchical structures and capitalistic tendencies, decolonization becomes a mere buzzword. Since libraries are a part of this larger institution, it is not an easy task to change direction, and some of the efforts might not accomplish the desired result on its own. To abandon the idea that the institutions involved in the legacy of colonialism will not be able to be part of that change is short sighted. It is not a wasted effort to try to harness the power of existing institutions to challenge issues of which they are currently very much the product and source. Opening minds and having the conversation about decolonization drives change further down the line.

Library administrators and librarians should be involved in and prioritize finding issues and challenges for libraries to decolonize collections. Serious research and conversation need to be undertaken by African studies librarians. Decolonizing library collections is an ongoing process and an unresolved conflict between library policies and priorities.

Librarianship must not be about gatekeeping, but rather about opening doors towards engagement, promoting marginalized voices in our own and other societies, and imagining a future that can be different from what we have seen and continue to see today.

Research Aims and Objectives

The present research study was conducted with the aim of exploring the ongoing efforts to decolonize university libraries across the United States and to establish a platform for sharing best practices among library professionals.

The objectives of the research study were as following a) to understand the role that academic libraries play in decolonizing library collections; b) to examine collection development methodologies and processes, vendor selection, and approval plans, along with the impact those may have on (de-)

colonizing collections; c) to identify the current policies libraries and institutions have in place to determine the process of decolonization and d) to identify changes in library instruction.

Methodology

Several methods of data collection were used: literature review, semi-structured interviews, surveys, and an examination of library collections policies. This study has been reviewed by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the study conforms to ethical principles in the conduct of research with human subjects.

The methods of data collection used included semi-structured interviews with nine academic African studies librarians and an examination of the collection policy documents, if available, of their institution. The issues discussed in the literature review established the basis for the topics during the interviews. The interviews were supplemented with surveys sent out to the Africana Librarians Council listserv between the period of July 2020 to September 2020 and resulted in only five responses. Even though the response was less than the researcher had hoped for, some of the insights were especially telling.

Research questions in the interviews (See Appendix A) and surveys (See Appendix B) include those aimed at understanding collection development methodologies and processes, the stakeholders involved in collection development, and the extent to which decolonization is an intentional process of librarianship in academic library spaces across the United States. Regarding collection development specifically, the study will maintain an explicit focus on Contemporary African Literature and contextual development. How do American librarians navigate the divide between on-campus demand and a more representative collection? Moreover, how is the best way to place materials from the African continent within their own context? Understanding these questions, the way librarians work to answer them, and the concerns and problems they face will contribute to development of best practices as well as ongoing research questions.

Analysis of the Interviews

The findings from the interviews provided an insight into the thoughts and opinions of academic librarians in African studies. All interviews for this study were held via telephone between March 2, 2020 and May 12, 2020 and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were color coded and analyzed. The following analysis is structured around the main themes identified, drawing on examples from interviews with librarians. The themes resulting from the interviews are general issues surrounding decolonizing African studies collections, collection development, instruction, and challenges.

Decolonization of collections

All librarians except for one agreed that the libraries they work in have an awareness of the process of the decolonization of library collections, but that is not always at the forefront. The interviewee who felt differently about this agreement said:

“It is not a philosophical question at _____. If you talk to colleagues about this at _____, they won’t know what you are talking about (Interviewee 6).”

One participant observed that the library is working to address equity issues. The health sciences library takes a big role at this university in assisting people in the community with information literacy, and the African American librarian focuses on equity, community issues, and minority perspectives.

Interviewee 2 reported not having an overall collection policy for decolonizing or diversifying collections but would like to see a written proposal with guidelines on how to diversify collections. The same interviewee would be interested in researching which voices are pushing back against white males, historically the predominant voice in the scholarship of African studies.

According to interviewee 2, by focusing on the process of decolonizing library collections, the collections will increasingly represent the population that is being discussed, and it will eventually represent a more globalized society. The challenge is: How do you identify these items? And how do you justify buying them instead of the expected or usual? Interviewee 4 considered language diversity the most important aspect of decolonizing library collections. Several participants agreed that building relationships and collaborating with African institutions to be the most important aspect of decolonizing library collections and the working of the library in general. Making connections and traveling to Africa to find books on Africa by African authors was another way of decolonizing library collections. There was particular concern about the African knowledge systems and there needing to be a decolonization of the politics of knowledge. Much of indigenous knowledge is excluded because it might not be in book format.

Conversations with colleagues are mostly about collaborating on projects, new resources, new vendors, and products. One librarian observed a couple of changes over the last 5 to 10 years. Students want digital collections and e-books, and libraries are increasingly trying to get rid of the colonial approach.

All librarians agreed that their libraries have the awareness of decolonizing library collections and will provide funding to diversify the collection.

Collection development

All interviewees agreed that decisions regarding collection development are made by curricular demand and emerging scholarship from graduate students and faculty. This includes looking at course types, faculty research, workshops on campus, and undergraduate lectures on campus. Most firm order acquisitions from Africa come from vendors such as Hogarth (various languages), LC Nairobi office, Clarke's Bookshop. In North America acquisitions come from EBSCO/GOBI Library Solutions. French language titles about Africa are acquired through AMALIVRE. Seven of the interviewees confirmed working with approval plans.

One interviewee pointed out the challenges of relying on vendors: How do they operate? And how do they make decisions?

“If they buy four items and six libraries want the same title, whom do they ship it to (Interviewee 1)?”

The ongoing challenge for most of the librarians interviewed is the awareness of what is being published on the continent. Several librarians alluded to the same issue in acquiring materials from Africa.

“How do you know what to get if you don't know what is out there (Interviewee 1)?”

Interviewee 3 reported deemphasizing circulating collections and buys primarily on demand. Others reported challenges in making acquisitions decisions, acquiring primary sources, identifying memoirs and literature by Africans in Europe, and acquiring films that focus on the African experience in Europe. Assessment of the collection was another aspect frequently mentioned. More specifically: How do you know which materials are getting used? Will the vendor send the subject profiles most aligned with the department? Might there be a shortage in some areas? Interviewee 7 talked about the need to conduct acquisitions assessments by looking at each country and how much funding is allocated to each country. All the interviewees mentioned the need for an increase in primary sources and the problematic nature of acquiring them--materials such as newspapers, government documents, indigenous and rare materials.

Challenges

The main challenges in decolonizing African studies library collections are: budgetary constraints; library administration decision-making processes; not knowing what is being published on the continent and who is receiving that material; relationships with vendors; keeping African languages on the shelves, even though usage might be low; lack of subject knowledge; and, creating connections with institutions on the African continent.

Recommendations

The interviewees' most frequently mentioned recommendations in taking steps towards a decolonized library collection were:

1. Greater collaboration between the African continent and US/European institutions
2. Increased Open Access
3. More direct relationships with vendors
4. Increased collecting of African vernacular materials representing diverse languages
5. Book trips to the African continent
6. A focus on African knowledge systems and scholarship

Analysis of the surveys

The surveys in this research were intended as a follow up to the interviews. The findings from the surveys provided an insight into the thoughts and opinions of academic librarians in African studies focusing on collections, barriers within the decolonization process, methods of decolonization and the theoretical underpinnings that might have influenced their understanding of decolonizing collections.

African studies collections

When asked what changes the survey respondents would like to make within the African studies collection, all participants agreed they would like to see an increase in collecting of indigenous African materials. One way to accomplish this would be to purchase directly and regularly from African-based creative writers, publishers, and scholars. Other kinds of desired resources from the African continent include materials in indigenous African languages, leisure reading material for students, material published by alternative presses, and less accessible publications. Respondents also cited spending more time on collection development as a condition to improve and work towards a decolonized African studies collection.

Challenges and barriers when collecting for African studies

A wide range of reasons were identified by the participants in discussing the obstacles towards a more decolonized collection of African studies. Only one respondent shared experiencing very few barriers and reported that their institution has made great efforts to collect in this area. Due to competing obligations and demands of the job, not enough time was mentioned as a limiting factor in being able to explore ways of incorporating indigenous materials from Africa. Collecting materials that have limited print runs and distribution channels, as well as collecting published primary sources, were also seen as the most important challenges to collecting for African studies. This was illustrated by one of the survey respondents:

“ My institution makes it difficult for vendors to apply as sellers to the library with complex online forms (in English only), for me to order from vendors/dealers of African-produced literature/scholarship, and lacks expertise/staff to catalog anything in African languages. Other area studies collections in my library either have more leeway or sufficient time/staffing support to surmount these barriers than I do for African studies (survey respondent 3).”

The increased push by institutions in the collection and usage of e-Books in academic libraries was mentioned several times as a threat to broadening reader access to African voices, thoughts, and materials for the greater community. Another respondent mentioned the colonial legacy of foolscap/folio format paper and how a seemingly unimportant fact can diminish the access to voices from the African continent.

“....I think the colonial legacy of foolscap format paper and the fact that my institution is (and others are) devaluing print (especially "non-standard" oversize formats) is an important issue, further biasing against African content representation in the collection and access to African scholarship and authors. I didn't come to understand the scale that this seemingly technical/object project had such a biased effect on African produced materials until this project. The oversized collection in a major location was fully 40% African (survey respondent 2).”

Methods of trying to decolonize African studies collections

Several methods were mentioned by the respondents--one of them being collaborating with an African student reading club on campus. One respondent reported the following methods: setting up approval plans with vendors, maintaining relationships with African librarians, participating in conferences, and staying in touch with the African continent. Creating course guides with links to digitized African primary sources and cultural materials to make them easily accessible was mentioned by two respondents. One responded commented that creating course guides with original content is an “invaluable resource that provides context and understanding of Africa and also allows authentic African voices to be heard when used in teaching and research (survey respondent 4).”

Another respondent mentioned collaborating with a comic book writer/artist to complete a major purchase and working directly with the author to deliver the payment. Yet another respondent explained:

“I would like to see more of Africa visibly present in our spaces. I would like to see a space that truly represents what is seen as you walk down the streets of Africa. Vibrant, colorful, and stimulating. Information present in various forms, in all formats. All African language materials are now processed and available on the open shelves and sit right next to the European languages (survey respondent 1).”

Successfulness of these methods

Participants reported varying degrees of success in implementing these methods. For example, one respondent felt that library administration had other priorities for library building space than trying to dedicate a particular space to make Africa more visible. Other respondents noted that they had been successful in creating course guides and a library display with a connected lecture.

All the respondents of the survey felt that the attempt to decolonize African studies library collections will eventually turn the collection into a trustworthy and accurate account of the African continent, its history, and people. This is illustrated by the following quote:

“Decolonization allows for authenticity in African studies teaching and research. It enables a deeper understanding of Africa, promoting active learning by engaging students at a personal level. Improvement in student engagement results in better learning outcomes (survey respondent 4).”

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the interviews and surveys provided an insight into the thoughts and opinions of academic librarians concerning the process of decolonizing African studies library collections. The responses from the interviews and the surveys turned out to be very similar. From these responses the researcher believes that much of the process at selected university libraries in the United States is at an early stage. Academic librarians and libraries are aware of the need to decolonize library collections and libraries in general, but specific action is lacking.

It was the intent of the researcher to examine the African studies library collection policies of the libraries in question to form a more rounded opinion on the issues, but only one library has their African studies collection policy posted on the website.

It is clear from the research that most librarians feel supported by library administration in their efforts to bring in more authentic materials from the African continent. However, it is also clear that many of the librarians feel hampered in their efforts by budget related restrictions and knowing where and how to find materials, in particular primary sources. A drive towards digital resources has also increased the lack of access for many people. The lack of material culture within library collections was also seen as a deficiency in understanding the historic and cultural formation of Africa. Another interesting facet that was revealed during the interviews was that to implement structural changes and to make progress towards decolonizing African studies collections, a seasoned and experienced librarian is needed-- someone who has a deep understanding of African materials, knows its history, and knows how to form relationships in the continent. This might seem like an obvious requirement but in many university libraries the practice proves to be different.

Recommendations and Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several recommendations. Many actions would contribute to a more decolonized African studies collection: increasing Open Access, collecting primary authentic materials, collaborating, and sharing knowledge with institutions in Africa, making Africa visible within our spaces, and restructuring library instruction. Some of these suggestions should be explored as stand-alone

research questions and would be a great starting point for further research. For example: How can we create more meaningful library instruction sessions about some aspect on Africa? How can we place African materials in context, and how can we keep track of what is being published in Africa in a more efficient manner?

The research was intended as a mere snapshot of the attitudes and beliefs about the process of decolonizing library collections. Several areas relating to the decolonization of African studies collections deserve much further investigation. The researcher would like to have seen a higher rate of participation in the surveys. In hindsight, the researcher believes that the questions in the interviews and the surveys could have had an increased focus on library instruction, library spaces, budgetary constraints and the level of conversations or actions that are taking place in the academic libraries. It is the researcher's opinion, and this was also the opinion of most of the participants, that time constraints and competing priorities is still a real issue within the library profession.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Can you talk about your current role in your library?
 - a. How long have you been in your position?
2. How do you make decisions about acquiring materials in African studies?
 - a. Can you walk me through a current acquisition?
3. Which vendors do you use?
4. Do you work with approval plans?
5. What challenges do you face in making these decisions?
6. When you talk to your colleagues about these acquisitions, what kinds of things do you talk about?
7. What, if anything, do you wish were different about collecting these materials?
8. How have things in your field changed in the last 3/5/10 years?
9. What changes would you like to make in African studies collections?
 - a. Can you talk about your priorities?
10. Has your library addressed decolonizing their collections?
 - a. Can you tell me more about that?
11. How do you feel about decolonizing African studies collections?
 - a. What is the process?
 - b. Where do/would you start?
12. What are the intended outcomes?
 - a. Can you talk about the benefits of decolonizing these collections?
13. Can you talk about the challenges of decolonizing library collections?
14. Is there something you would like to talk about that I have not asked?

Appendix B

Survey Questions

1. Are there any theoretical or conceptual understandings that influenced the way you think about decolonizing collections, especially how it relates to African studies?

Yes, please describe:

No

2. In what ways, if any, is your institution involved in decolonizing collections, in particular for African Studies?

- a. Written policy on decolonization
- b. Hosting conversations on decolonization
- c. Awareness raising about decolonization
- d. Other

3. In the past 10 years have you as an individual tried to decolonize the African Studies collections?

Yes, please describe any methods you have used in the past 5/10 years:

No

4. Were you or are you successful in using these methods? Could you give an example of a successful strategy in decolonizing the African studies collection?

Yes, please describe a successful strategy:

No, please describe why it was not successful:

5. What barriers do you face when you try to collect for African studies?

Open ended question

6. What changes would you as an individual like to make in your African studies collections?

Open ended question

7. Do you believe there are benefits of decolonizing these collections?

Open ended question

8. Has your library done the following for the purpose of decolonizing the African studies collection?

- a. Changed your collection policy
- b. Made book trips to Africa
- c. Promoted open access
- d. Adapted instruction sessions to incorporate African studies sources to contextualize single titles
- e. Other

9. If you teach or instruct, have you sought to change or adapt your pedagogy to align with decolonial theory or practice?

Yes, please describe

No, I do not teach

10. Do you speak or have studied an African language?

Yes, what level

No

11. Is there something you would like to talk about that I have not asked?