

# African studies bibliography: a state-of-the-art review

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## *Old Problems*

Regular readers of *Africa Bibliography* may recall that, in an article for the 2001 volume, bookseller Paul Wilson mused that the personal libraries of renowned Africanists Basil Davidson, and Roland Oliver and Suzanne Miers, really should go back to Africa notwithstanding the lack of secure repositories and funds, a way of accomplishing this for which, alas, he saw 'no established procedure'. Since then, however, his wish has been granted in relation to another collection, that of Bernth Lindfors, whose wonderful arsenal of African literature *has* made its way back to Africa, to Pietermaritzburg, with a little help from corporate friends in South Africa. Much earlier still, in 1991, the then editor of *Africa Bibliography*, Chris Allen, wrote in these pages that African Studies bibliography suffered from both inadequate bibliographic control and lack of 'computerization'. Here, too, things have changed, largely for the better, though many old problems remain. It is the current complexities and future possibilities of this situation that this article concentrates on. But, before discussing the state-of-the-art of Africana bibliography, it is germane to recall the main problems that confront this endeavour.

A basic problem inhibiting better knowledge of, and access to, relevant information about Africa is the ongoing and well-known crisis of African publishing. That is not to say that little is being published in Africa. Indeed a great deal of very good material is regularly published, but the viability of publishers continues to be threatened by general resource shortages, instability, poorly developed distribution, and domination of markets by transnational publishers with little interest in areas such as African language imprints. The effective reach of new technologies within the continent has also been limited, cramping the visibility of African publishers and writers.

A further problem, pointed out by John McIlwaine (also writing in these pages, in 2001) has been the variable quality of some printed bibliographies. In addition, even if there is no 'book famine' in African studies in the North, one might nowadays talk of a 'bibliography famine'. Hans Zell points to a general decline in the number of published bibliographies on Africa. Although the annual 'New Africana Reference Works' section of *African Book Publishing Record* does provide regular updates of new bibliographies and reference works, it does not do so at the sort of depth possible in book-length works. Behind this phenomenon are both market and technology trends. Zell notes the irony that, 'although there are now more and more colleges and universities offering some kind of programme or courses on Africa, many libraries at these institutions are not funded enough to acquire the essential reference works that they need, much less monographs'.

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The bottom has fallen out of the market for printed book-length specialized bibliographies. This is caused, obviously enough, by the greatly enhanced functionality of search engines such as Google and the ever-increasing electronic access to information about Africa through online journals and, more recently, archival and other sources. A rough estimate of this decline can be gauged from a sample Worldcat search. I obtained the number of items catalogued containing the keyword 'Africa', together with the subject of 'Bibliography', over the last two decades and a half. Worldcat lists (June 2006) 1,343 books and 7 Internet resources with these parameters published from 1981 to 1990. From 1991 to 2000, however, the respective figure for books drops sharply to 967, whilst Internet items rises steadily to 39. From 2001 to 2006, books have dropped further to 186 and Internet resources are already at 29. Admittedly, this is a very incomplete measure in several respects: I could have used numerous other combinations, with many other keywords; there are multiple records in Worldcat, which is always adding many items retrospectively; and some works are published in both book and electronic formats. Nevertheless, this sample does clearly show the decline in books – and a steady rise in e-resources. Further searches by subject 'Bibliography' and keyword 'Nigeria' (1981–90: 173/1; 1991–2000: 110/3; 2001–2006: 14/2), 'Ethiopia' (1981–90: 54/0; 1991–2000: 30/2; 2001–2006: 6/2), and 'Tanzania' (1981–90: 51/0; 1991–2000: 21/2; 2001–2006: 5/2) confirm these widely perceived trends. Efforts to stimulate substantial online bibliographies have not been very successful, although the *Electronic Journal of Africana Bibliography* <[sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/ejab/index.html](http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/ejab/index.html)> has published nine bibliographies between 1997 and 2004, and some journals such as *African Affairs* strive valiantly to keep readers up to date with recently published material of value, and individual scholars increasingly use the web to craft their own in-house bibliographies.

Finally, bibliographical endeavour has not been assisted by the recent rather serious decline in some countries – such as Britain – of African Studies infrastructure – academics, libraries, and librarians. Recent trends in professional library positions towards generalization, and away from subject librarians such as Africana bibliographers, are unfortunate and shortsighted from the perspective of African Studies. The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the British Library (see Marion Wallace 2005 for a survey of the latter's current activity) appear to be the only British libraries still to retain librarians whose job descriptions are assigned wholly to Africana. Things are rather healthier in the US, with perhaps a dozen or so clearly assigned Africana bibliographers, and perhaps another dozen or so carrying out this work under wider job titles, although there, too, similar generalist trends can be noted. Outside of these places and outside Africa there are only a handful of Africana bibliographers, most notably in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. The point here is that, without professional Africana bibliographers, the task of maintaining and improving bibliographic coverage of Africa is much harder. After all, behind every good library stand good librarians and, if the bibliographer trade is not encouraged, then clearly the art will dwindle. Of course, not all bibliographers are librarians, and academics and especially publishers will continue to play a role in generating metadata about Africana; publishers have long recruited academics and librarians to help with their editing and presentation of data, and this will continue.

Despite these problems, the study of Africa remains fairly well provided for bibliographically. In part, this is due to the work of the erstwhile editors of bibliographic indexes such as *Africa Bibliography*, *African Studies Abstracts Online*, and *International African Bibliography*, whose chief value lies in their regular and judicious selection, classification, and accurate indexing of information, which distinguishes them from the randomness of, say, a Google search. They are also effective current awareness tools and journals of record, not least for individual subscribers who benefit from having a compact personal printed copy. The online consolidation of these annual compilations to achieve a single searchable database(s) would make them still more useful. Currently, although some of these products are available online in various packages such as Pro Quest, Net Library and JSTOR, each individual annual volume must be searched separately. To these tools may be added a range of online databases that include African content as well as a myriad of publishers' current awareness services. Digital resources now dominate education and new digital trends offer many opportunities to improve bibliographic coverage of Africa; but they also present serious challenges.

### *New Trends and Challenges*

Today, those working in large, well-funded institutions have rich resources at their beck and call. Major publishers offer aggregations of content spanning diverse subjects and facilitating searching, browsing, and cross-linking to other bibliographic or full-text products, enabling those libraries that can afford these products to increase access. On the other hand, monopoly trends exacerbate unfair pricing and push many smaller or less wealthy libraries into serial cancellations. Moreover, data aggregations by major publishers often lack substantial content *from* Africa. With the explosion of information, researchers still need to know what is being published in new books and journals, especially in the extensive array of print journals from Africa. This is something large research libraries have long well understood by developing collection development strategies that balance the acquisition of imprints from Africa and the North.

To bridge this gap, there are a growing number of successful cooperative projects aiming at building digital libraries with African content. Elsewhere (Limb 2005, 2006) I have analysed some of these full-text resources, from exciting new suites of online African journals like SA e-Publications <www.journals.co.za>, the African e-Journals Project <africa.msu.edu/AEJP>, the Digital Imaging Project of South Africa <DISA: disa.nu.ac.za>, the digitization of archival papers by the (British) National Archives and the US-Southern Africa Aluka Project, and the exciting audio-visual African Online Digital Library (www.aodl.org) as well as the French Bibliothèque Nationale's Gallica Project gallica.bnf.fr/ that has digitized rare Africana. What is starting to change is the capacity of some African institutions to initiate and maintain such projects. SABINET and SA e-Publications have mainstreamed scholarly journals and Pan African bodies such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) have made good progress in digitizing their journals. Other successful African online initiatives range from government documents to e-newspapers and e-theses, the latter chiefly in South Africa. Projects such as Aluka and DISA aim to

capacitize and be self-sustaining, a development that is crucial if, as Johannes Britz and Peter Lor (2003) argue, the information flow, not just from North to South but also from South to North, is to become more equitable. Commercial publishers have not been idle and have developed new online teaching and research products such as the *African Writers Series* and *Empire Online*. Accompanying such full-text projects, both in Africa and the North, are a range of bibliographic databases and indexes on which I will focus here – which seems appropriate for readers of this annual – although increasingly new digital products are blurring the distinction between text and index.

There is still nothing in Africa to compare with either the mammoth union catalogues such as the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)'s Worldcat or the major journal citation databases. It is this lacuna that has long pushed African bibliographers and indexers back into tedious scanning or indexing of journals, publishers' catalogues and websites, and other sources. What makes Worldcat so fertile a source for the restless bibliographer is its scope (over 60 million bibliographic records) and interactive nature; as a cooperative cataloguing venture it has no peer. It is, of course, not truly global, with only South African libraries contributing from Africa, and only limited input from Europe. SABINET maintains very effective bibliographic control of South Africa's scholarly universe but national bibliographies are in disarray in many other African countries. Perhaps the SABINET or OCLC models may inspire future joint or collective catalogues on a regional or Pan African scale and the issue should be discussed when the International Federation of Library Associations meets in August 2007 in Durban. Such an ambitious project would require far more resources than African states could provide, but greater regional bibliographical integration might form the foundation of future development.

In the meantime, putting to one side the continent-wide *Africa Bibliography*, *African Abstracts*, and *International African Bibliography*, there is reasonable online bibliographical coverage of Eastern and Southern Africa by the Library of Congress *Quarterly Index to African Periodical Literature*, reflecting that Library's successful and wide-ranging acquisitions programmes based in Nairobi. However this does not link to full-text, and West and parts of Central Africa are much less adequately covered. For instance, the amazing proliferation of Nigerian print journals (many of them ephemeral, it is true) lacks concomitant bibliographic coverage.

Perhaps initiatives will come from elsewhere, either on an individual or collective basis. The most extraordinary individual bibliographical venture of recent years has been the African Periodical Bibliographic Database <[www.africabib.org](http://www.africabib.org)>, an open access labour of love by Davis Bullwinkle. This sort of resource can be most useful for undergraduates and others seeking, say, quick access to relevant articles for an essay and it has the advantage of open access. Another interesting recent project is the African Newspapers Union List (AFRINUL), which provides a database of newspaper holdings based on cooperative input. These tools are flanked by some reliable online reference resources, such as the more general *African Studies Companion* <[www.africanstudiescompanion.com](http://www.africanstudiescompanion.com)>, which collates and evaluates a very wide range of information sources on African Studies, and more specialized products, such as *Ethnologue*, an encyclopaedic reference work that covers African languages <[www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)>.

Citation databases have been slow to develop in Africa due to weak local publishing and lack of interest by overseas companies. The two major online continent-wide bibliographic databases are the above-mentioned *Quarterly Index of African Periodical Literature*, and the National Inquiry Services Centre (NISC)'s Africa-Wide NiPad. The latter combines previously separate databases, *African Studies* and *South African Studies*, which in turn aggregate a wide range of other databases indexing Africana, including *African Studies Abstracts*, IBISCUS, and the SOAS and Namibian National Library catalogues to name just a few. Africa-Wide NiPad is essentially bibliographic, although a limited amount of full-text material, mainly news reports, is also included. A particular feature is the inclusion of South African professorial and graduate student research. It is, however, much stronger on Southern Africa than other regions of the continent. As I have pointed out elsewhere (2005), these African-based (if at times foreign-controlled) databases generally provide better bibliographic coverage of African journal content than databases of the North, although there is still little integration of bibliographic citations with full-text.

Although not designed primarily as bibliographic resources, several full-text products present a great deal of information about African journal contents, for example African Journals Online (AJOL) <[www.ajol.info](http://www.ajol.info)>, SA e-Publications, the African e-Journals Project, and CODESRIA publications. AJOL was initially based at the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) in Oxford, but since 2005 has relocated to Africa where it is supported by NISC South Africa. AJOL provides open access tables of contents, abstracts, and article delivery of African journals. The African e-Journals Project provides full-text access to current issues of two African journals (via Project Muse) and back issues of eleven African journals, with articles readily located via search engines such as Google. A handful of African journals and newspapers are included in major database aggregators.

The superstructure in Africa to facilitate better bibliographic control is changing for the better. In the last few years, there has been modest success in library automation in African universities (Rosenberg 2005) and scientific and government bodies. This has been accompanied by a trickle of various electronic indexes to locally held materials, such as lists of theses or inventories of archival papers. For instance, the University of Dar es Salaam Library has placed online local bibliographies on such topics as biodiversity, civil society, education, law and sociology as well as their Regional Bibliographies and African Theses and Dissertations (Tanzania), together with abstracts. The Malawi National Bibliography cumulative volume has been scanned. Not all these resources are necessarily available via the Web: the e-Granary Digital Library Project has worked successfully with libraries in Nigeria and Uganda to network local (and, if permissions are granted, overseas) publications via intranets using very large hard drives, thereby obviating expensive bandwidth costs.

A new frontier in African universities is the digitization of theses/dissertations, with at least six South African universities (Witwatersrand, Pretoria, Unisa, Johannesburg, Free State, and Rhodes) placing their recent theses online, mostly in open full-text access. In this they are neither following the 'European' proprietary nor the American market, but rather the open access model. Across Africa there is an ambitious, continent-wide venture, the Database of African Theses and Dissertations (DATAD) <[www.aau.org/datad](http://www.aau.org/datad)>

of the Association of African Universities. This pilot database contains bibliographic data and abstracts of theses from eleven African countries. In the long run, it seeks to viably disseminate African theses; perhaps eventually some kind of 'UMI/ProQuest' venture may emerge. When it comes to African content, UMI/ProQuest itself currently provides only bibliographic access to South African theses.

Kwetu.Net ('Our home' in Swahili) in Kenya is an African-owned commercial website presenting hard-to-obtain full-text ephemera such as NGO and seminar papers, reports, photographs and some Masters theses obtained from national partners in Uganda and Kenya. At the moment this product is still largely limited to East Africa and the question arises of how it relates to or integrates with more mainstream publications. Such initiatives have potential to contribute significantly to bibliographic control because they cover materials not widely collected through normal library acquisition channels; on the other hand, they are unlikely really to grow unless they receive adequate African and overseas subscriptions enabling improved search capacity and greater quantity and better quality of data. It is important that these different sorts of projects succeed and multiply for, if they do, they will not only demonstrate the viability of Africa-based and African-owned digital publishing, but also enhance access to Africana for research, and in doing so make the collection of data for databases/bibliographies easier.

The researcher today expects immediate desktop delivery of full-text information. The challenge to all creators of bibliographic tools is to include this access in their products. Why can't it be like Google? When will access be seamless? – say the users. Full-text access will improve, but what will it cost? There are concerns that the end product of the massive digitization of retrospective book collections underway by the 'Big 5' libraries working with Google may not necessarily be openly accessible beyond these Ivy League universities and their partners.

Lack of integration, and the continued dispersal of bibliographic and full-text information across different products and different disciplines, means that a researcher, say, working on the social aspects of AIDS in Southern Africa, or on conflict resolution in West Africa, has to search in many different places to extract relevant information. The introduction of 'federated searching' and citation-linking applications will hopefully facilitate effective and seamless navigation across the gamut of library resources from an initial search box, much like a search engine. This will enhance the integration of different products and should be a particular boon to African Studies researchers who have such widely dispersed sources of information. One new role of the Africana bibliographer in this regard will be to advise on the prioritization of different aggregations of full-text and indexes of information on Africa so that a simple search query will be routed to the best quality and most relevant resources.

It has traditionally been the role of bibliographic tools such as *Africa Bibliography* to pull together the best of such literature in one place. This task has become, on the one hand, increasingly difficult with the explosion of information and yet, on the other hand, ironically, easier given the speed and effectiveness of online searching and access. There is a danger in thinking that Google will do it all; even with enhanced intelligent automation, there is still a need to detect, select and classify relevant information. The challenge now is

how to integrate relevant resources in order to create a 'one-stop shop' to the extent that this is feasible. Monopoly publishing trends offer one possibility of easier integration but also hazards. The experience of large commercial publishing corporations taking over smaller, niche African Studies publishers has not always been a happy one, with some big publishers abandoning African content in favour of other, more profitable spheres. Federated searching seems to offer a better arrangement that will enable libraries to integrate sources from different publishers, rank them, and present them to users. But to do this, the data still needs to be presented, and well organized; this is what makes the continuance and better accessibility of bibliographic resources such as *Africa Bibliography* so very important.

Three inescapable wider problems accompany these new trends: how to improve access within Africa itself; how to do this on a sustainable basis; and how to resolve questions of fairness and justice. As I have pointed out in recent publications (2005, 2006), overseas digital domination of Africa is increasing. Information scientist Dale Peters and Africana curator Michele Pickover, both from South Africa, lucidly spell out the danger. Pickover has thrown down the gauntlet about a new form of exploitation, suggesting digital repatriation is a chimera:

The lure of financial aid has ... spawned a new form of what might be perceived as cultural imperialism in the guise of preservation and access. (2002) ... How do we ensure that these digital projects do not serve to replace repatriation of actual heritage items with digital replicas thereby still ensuring ownership and control by the North and not addressing problems of cultural pillaging issues? Are these projects simply adding to the pressures being exerted on the states from which these objects originate, and one that is difficult for them to resist? (2005)

Yet such domination is not unchallenged. Recent criticism from Southern African scholars, librarians and archivists, including at the African Studies Association conference panels in the US, seems to have made some gate-keeping foundations at least more sensitive to the needs and budgets of African partners. Not that South African development will necessarily help other African countries; I have posed the question (2006) whether Western or South African 'digital imperialism' will reach tropical Africa first in a new Scramble for Africa seeking a new kind of commodity – the 'Digitization of Africa'. Such issues are the focus of the Workshop on the Politics of Digital Initiatives Concerning Africa at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign in August 2006. This will discuss the political context of, and contradictions between, efforts to revitalize African universities through digitization and information technologies, and ongoing inequalities. The job is still ahead of us. In 'The Digitization of Africa' (2006) I argue:

Whilst control of and profits from these trends largely bypass Africa, there is growing evidence of successful African digital ventures. A new 'Scramble for Africa,' for information resources to digitize, suggests a new process is unfolding: the 'digitization of Africa' .... The challenge for all involved in the digitization of African resources is to ensure access, sustainability, and fairness in the sharing of these resources. These goals can be furthered by close cooperation with and listening to African partners and by the design and implementation of models that effectively deliver information resources over the long term in mutually beneficial ways.

It may well be, however, that a dazzling new round of technological innovations will both add to the problems of, and provide possible solutions for, the Africana bibliographer. These include visual clustering and 'discovery pathways'; the proliferation of online film and sound recordings with spoken word automated indexing; the preservation of African web sites (see Lor and Britz 2006); the growth of institutional repositories with related digital preservation issues; and significantly enhanced speed of searching. All these will present mind-boggling challenges to catalogue, index, and integrate that must, surely, in turn drive a return to cooperative ventures.

### *Conclusion*

Things have changed greatly since 1985 when *Africa Bibliography* (covering 1984) first appeared. State-of-the-art technology now allows, in theory, development of ever more comprehensive and accessible bibliographic coverage of works on Africa. Yet ironically, in the last few years there has been a substantial decline in the number of book-length bibliographies about Africa. While the form of some problems confronting Africana bibliographers and the nature of their possible solutions have changed, the need for up-to-date, quality information for the study of Africa has not. In general, there is a need for much more human and capital investment in Africa itself – in libraries, publishing, and educational structures so that Africans can not only make better use of their own information resources, but also distribute them more effectively to the North, and on equitable terms. 'One-off', grant-funded pilot projects seeking to mitigate these problems do little in the long run but show the way; mainstreaming is now necessary. The technical resources are now available to facilitate this, but this requires vision, and a new kind of transcontinental, disinterested cooperation. This might be made more possible by funding from foundations, the EU and Unesco.

There is a need for greater encouragement of academic-librarian-publisher interactions as well as more interaction, exchanges and mentoring with African librarians, something that today is far too infrequent. Indeed, the recent success of digital projects in Africa suggests closer cooperation between all stakeholders would greatly enhance two-way knowledge of, and access to, bibliographic and full-text resources.

One wonders if, relatively, the state-of-the-art in Africana bibliography really is so much better in the North, with its different publishing empires jockeying for power and with their continued relative neglect of Africa in favour of more commercially lucrative pastures. By compartmentalizing and 'locking up' knowledge about Africa behind a hundred different passwords, the task of bibliographic control and ease of access gets harder. Undoubtedly, federated searching will help solve this particular problem, but there is a need for more comprehensive indexes that are seamlessly linked to full-text. At the same time, there is a need to consolidate and maintain extant resources. In this regard, and in amongst all the hi-tech initiatives, *Africa Bibliography* continues to be a very useful and reliable resource. In the future, a single, easily searchable, cumulative *Africa Bibliography* online database linked to full-text would help make this excellent resource more effective and ensure its continued existence in both print and electronic formats.



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