



Exploring the Concept of International and Comparative Librarianship

Dr. Chipo Mutongi

*Phd, Msc, MBA, BA, HND-LIS, Dip-Edu, Dip-LIS, Dip-P Magnt, Dip- Salaries Admn.
City Of Harare, Zimbabwe Open University*

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ABSTRACT: *The philosophy behind the studying of international and comparative librarianship is that knowledge cannot be packaged into neat portions. One has to discover it for himself/herself and international and comparative librarianship helps him/her to do so. International and comparative librarianship is on-going conversations and study, rather than a static body of information. A fundamental shift is occurring in the world as we are moving away from the world in which countries were relatively self-contained entities, isolated from each other by barriers to cross border trade and investment. Due to globalisation, we are now living in a global village which has been enhanced by the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) hence the need to understand international and comparative librarianship. This article introduces the readers to the concept of international and comparative librarianship. A distinction between international and comparative librarianship will be established in this article and the purpose of international and comparative librarianship are identified which include information and knowledge sharing, accepting each other, foreign competition and benchmarking.*

Keywords: *comparative librarianship, domestic librarianship, globalisation, global village, international librarianship, librarianship.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The global village has emerged calling the study of comparative and international librarianship more important. Lor (2010) avers that the field remains dominated by compilations of chapters about libraries in various countries. I have long felt that there is more to international librarianship than descriptions of librarianship in other countries. A more coherent and structured approach to the subject is needed. This article introduces us to international and comparative librarianship. Comparative librarianship might not be international but can just be across cultures in the same country. There are also some situations whereby comparative librarianship can also be international, if it is covering cross national boundaries comparative issues.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this article are to:

- define international librarianship
- explain comparative librarianship
- give a distinction between international and comparative librarianship
- identify the purpose of international and comparative librarianship.

1. Definition of Librarianship

Chowdhury (2009:4) defines librarianship as profession in which members are engaged in the application of appropriate theories, principles, tools and techniques in implementing information service related activities including information storage, retrieval, dissemination, preservation, organisation, management of and access to information. A library does not exist in a vacuum therefore calls for international and comparative librarianship.

2. What is International Librarianship?

*Corresponding Author: Dr. Chipo Mutongi
*Phd, Msc, MBA, BA, HND-LIS, Dip-Edu, Dip-LIS, Dip-P Magnt, Dip- Salaries Admn.
City Of Harare, Zimbabwe Open University*

International Librarianship differs from the domestic librarianship in that a library operating across borders must deal with the forces of three kinds of environment which are domestic, foreign and international.

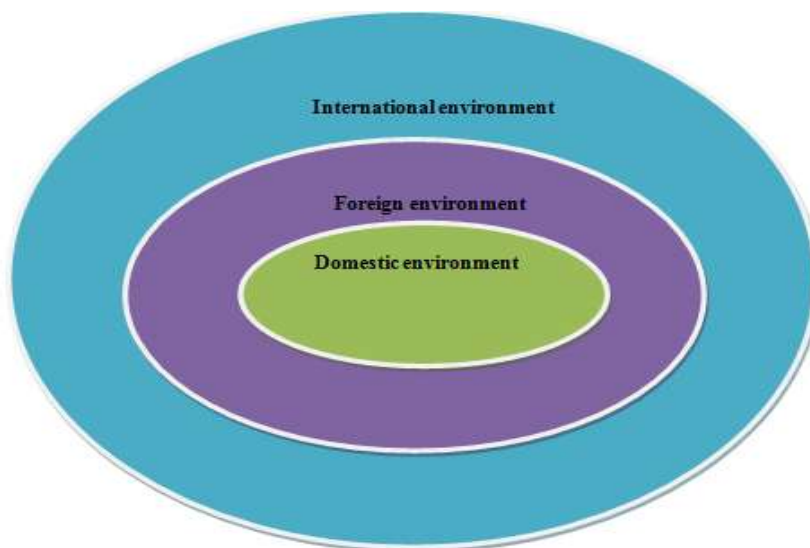


Figure 1: International librarianship

“International librarianship consists of activities carried out among or between governmental or non-governmental institutions, organisations, groups or individuals of two or more nations, to promote, establish, develop, maintain and evaluate library, documentation and allied services, and librarianship and the library profession generally, in any part of the world” (Parker, 1974:221). The activities are conducted in a relationship among or between parties at various levels ranging from individuals to governments among others, include resource sharing, standardisation, development aid, political and cultural influences, and relations between and/or among national associations and exchanges of staff, students and scholars

Several key points for consideration are raised by the definition:

- (a) International librarianship is a field of activity, rather than a scientific discipline. This does not, of course, prevent the activities from being studied with scientific rigor. In this case the field may be referred to as “international library science,” particularly as practiced in the United States, where the term “library science” is used to refer to the field as a scientific discipline;
- (b) The activities are conducted in a relationship “among or between” parties at various levels, ranging from individuals to governments. Such activities, among others, include resource sharing, standardisation, development aid, political and cultural influences, relations between and/or among national associations, and exchanges of staff, students and scholars;
- (c) These parties are located in two or more nations (countries). This stipulation raises the question of what is meant by “international.” Strictly speaking, relations between two countries are referred to as “bilateral” and purists would restrict the use of the term “international” to refer to relations between more than two countries (Keresztesi, 1981), but in international librarianship this distinction is seldom observed (Low, 2016).

International librarianship covers international library and information science relations which give birth to international organisations and library associations. It also includes the strategies that can be used to effectively and efficiently conduct business in international and comparative librarianship.

3. What is Comparative Librarianship?

Comparison looks for similarities and differences. It is not enough, however to say that something is or is not similar. A good comparison will try to explain why the similarity or difference exists. Such explanations should be written down at every point of the comparison (Simsova, 1992:10). According to Harrod’s Librarians Glossary (1995), Comparative librarianship is the study of library services in various countries, reflecting different national, cultural, political or societal environments. The comparison of similarities and analysis of differences leads to a better understanding of the general principles involved and nature consideration of the success of varying approaches. It is the systematic analysis of library development practices or problems as they occur under different circumstances most usually in different countries, considered in the context of the

relevant historical, geographic, economic, political, social, cultural and other determinate background factors in order to understand library problems (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int).

It is commonly stressed in defining the term that:

- Comparative librarianship involves two or more national, cultural or societal environments.
- The study includes a comparable comparison.
- Includes philosophical or theoretical concepts of librarianship through the analysis of the similarities and differences of phenomena in various environments. (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int).

Danton (1973:52) states that comparative librarianship is an “area of scholarly investigation and research (that) may be defined as the analysis of libraries, library systems, some aspect of librarianship, or library problems in two or more national, cultural or societal environments, in terms of socio-political, economic, cultural, ideological, and historical contexts. This analysis is for the purpose of understanding the underlying similarities and differences and for determining explanations of the differences, with the ultimate aim of trying to arrive at valid generalisations and principles.” Danton (1977:4) later slightly amended his definition. Both of his contributions emphasize three essential aspects of comparative librarianship:

(a) There has to be a “cross-societal or cross-cultural element.” Often this is cross-country or international, but the comparison can be conducted within a single country, provided that the societal, cultural or ideological differences are such that they can give rise to differences in the nature of the library as an institution. Hence a comparison of public libraries in the German, French and Italian speaking cantons of Switzerland can legitimately be classified as comparative librarianship, but a comparison of the library use of working class and middle class Britons would not. There is a danger of including comparisons that are not cross-societal or cross-cultural in scope is that, since comparisons are inherent in empirical research, the greater part of research in library science could be labeled as “comparative librarianship”.

(b) There have to be “actual comparisons,” which go beyond mere descriptions or juxtaposition of data. Comparison implies the analysis of the similarities and differences in the sets of data collected.

(c) An attempt should be made to explain the observed similarities and differences with a view to building theory. Thus comparative librarianship is described as a discipline which employs a rigorous scientific methodology, on the pattern of other, older comparative disciplines such as comparative education. (Low, 2016).

4. International Versus Comparative Librarianship

The comparative is not synonymous with international librarianship. A study tour of libraries which aims at promoting international understanding should come under the heading international, while another study tour planned to compare the solution of a particular problem in a number of countries should come under the heading of comparative. According to Low (2010), comparative librarianship is a subcategory of international librarianship. Comparative librarianship in cross-cultural study may not necessarily be international librarianship. International librarianship is strictly limited to those activities that involve librarianship and all aspects in cross-national boundaries whilst comparative librarianship focuses on comparison of libraries functions and services in two or more countries or in one country. Comparative librarianship may be conducted at both national and international levels. International should refer to the field and comparative to methodology. International librarianship may or may not have a comparative dimension.

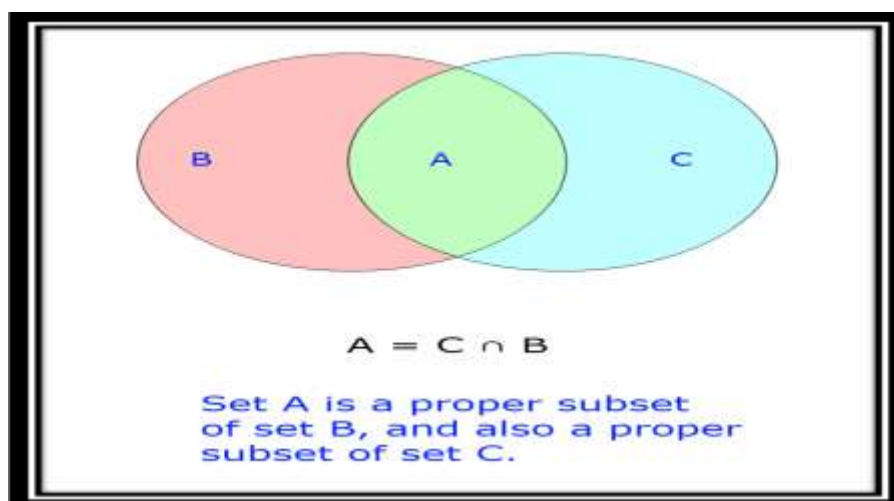


Figure 2: International versus Comparative librarianship

KEY

A= Similarities between International and comparative librarianship

B=International librarianship

C=Comparative librarianship

The Venn diagram on figure 2 indicates that international librarianship may or may not have a comparative dimension. However when one is doing comparative studies of two or more countries, this can also be regarded as international librarianship. Thus, comparative librarianship may be conducted at both national and international levels but if it is conducted in one nation, it ceases to be international though remains comparative.

5. The History of International and Comparative Librarianship

Comparative anatomy was the earliest of all. It was started in 1555 by Balon, who compared the skeletons of man and bird (Simsova and Mackee, 1975), An early definition of comparative anatomy by Charleton in 1960, runs as follows: “a comparison of the parts of birds, fishes, insects and worms with the same or like parts in man, so that common characters and properties may be observed”. This comparison was however led to comparative librarianship. Comparative Psychology employs the methods of natural history, but developing them further by the use of experimental and quantitative methods. Comparative ethics, religion, mythology, linguistics, literature, Politics and government all use comparative method adjusted to the needs of their particular subjects. The problems of comparative politics and government are nearest to those of comparative education. Comparative studies have developed in other subject areas such as in medicine, biology, government, literature, linguistics, law and education. Comparative education has now existed for over a hundred years and has a well-developed methodology, which can be applied without difficult to comparative librarianship. The comparative approach or method in sociology is in a sense covers all sociology, for any sociological research necessarily compares some variables with others. It can be claimed that the pioneer in comparative librarianship is Chase Done, who in 1954 introduced the term in print in two articles. The term did not draw much attention in the first decade following Dane’s articles (Conference.ifla.org/past/ifla78/int). After that the term comparative librarianship was employed and explored by several other forerunners in the field who included Carl. M. White. International librarianship has emerged due to issues of international trade, relations, business and globalisation. The internet has also facilitated comparative and international librarianship as libraries without walls can be accessed all over the world from the internet. The information n to compare the libraries is now easily accessed from the internet.

6. Purpose of International and Comparative Librarianship

The following are some of the purposes of comparative librarianship:

- Contributes to the advancement of international understanding and cooperation (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int)
- By participating in the life of the new country they become part of its environment in which its institutions are rooted. In many cases they also create parallel institutions of their own. Simsova (1992:10) notes that “once a group of people from a particular culture is transplanted to another country, it leaves its original institutions behind hence resulting in acculturation.
- Provides background information for use in foreign visits or services (Aliwi, 2013)
- Exoticism. It includes curiosity about how things are done in foreign countries, a love of travel and adventure, and the prestige that comes from having been where others have not. Writings motivated by exoticism tend to be anecdotal and descriptive (Low, 2007).
- Comparative librarianship offers a suitable technique for investigating not just libraries abroad, but also the libraries and reading of the minority cultures within a country’s boundary. (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int)
- It brings about in the individual’s attitudes to the world around them. People are made to see the relativity of their own values and of the institutions they have used from childhood.
- Exchanging of ideas information and knowledge
- Promotion of peace and understanding among the nations in the world (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int)
- To seek full understanding and correct interpretation of the library system or problem under review (Aliwi, 2013).
- We learn to accept that things are done differently in different places and to abstain from passing a value judgement about such differences. It helps in stepping out of one’s experience.
- To develop useful policy principles or laws and to understand them thoroughly (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int)

- Provides guidelines for a proposed new library programme in one's own country or in foreign country. (Aliwi, 2013)
- To understand the development in a country and many countries and to discover what developments have been successful and can be copied elsewhere.
- It can uncover, in our professional discipline, neglected and hidden approaches to important technical library problems, but even more important comparative suggests a new and critical role for librarianship (Simssova and Markee, 1975).
- To acquire knowledge about the relationships of the observed phenomena (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int).
- Today global events and competition affect all organisations including libraries therefore the need for international and comparative librarianship.
- To formulate meta librarianship, the philosophy and theory underlying the practice of librarianship throughout the world (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int)
- Contributes to the critical thinking, analysis and solution of widely found library problems (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int)
- Enables libraries to source materials or labour at reasonable prices
- Results in cloud-sourcing and cloud-funding
- Exposure to foreign competition will encourage increased efficiency and effectiveness thereby improving quality on products and services.
- The developing countries can learn from the developed countries and also the developed countries can also learn something from a developing country
- Stimulates and assists judicious consideration and possible adaptation of promising practices and solutions to library problems from one area to another (Conference.infla.org/past/ifla78/int)
- New market opportunities
- A bigger market means more customers, increased revenue, a large profit margin and allows the libraries to realise economies of scale
- The study of international and comparative librarianship helps librarians to step outside their own culturally based system of values and is therefore particularly important at the formative stages of professional development
- International and comparative librarianship helps us to appreciate the operations of different libraries
- Helps in benchmarking
- It facilitates innovation. Harrison (1989:xii) has put it: "...librarians with weather-eyes on professional practices in other countries have been able to adopt, adapt and apply many of these to their own library situations".
- Broadening and deepening our understanding of professional challenges and solutions
- Working in foreign countries and virtual working.

III. CONCLUSION

We had an opportunity to be introduced to international and comparative librarianship. A distinction between international and comparative librarianship was established. From the exploration it was seen that international and comparative librarianship are not synonymous though in some cases comparative librarianship can be international. The purpose of international and comparative librarianship was discussed and it can result in expanding the library's market hence result in the increase of economies of scale, as well as resource sharing and wider information and knowledge sharing.

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Profiles of author and photograph



Dr. Chipo Mutongi: A Talent Development Officer in the City of Harare, worked as a Librarian at the City of Harare with more than eleven years experience in library, information and knowledge management; a part lecturer and a PhD/DPhil research thesis supervisor/ under study at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), with more than nine years lecturing experience; Research Supervisor for all levels of education; member of the International Board of Reviewers for the International Journal of Doctoral Studies (IJDS); Journal Reviewer- Journal of Information and Knowledge Management (JIKM); published over eighteen articles in International Journals; DCIZ board member-Marketing and Communication, published more than ten modules with Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU); is in the process of co-authoring a book entitled: International Politics Corporation and Integration: Problems Facing Modern Day Africa; attained the highest and most prestigious degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Information and Knowledge Management (ZOU); Master of Science in Library and Information Science (NUST); the more professional degree of Master of Business Administration (ZOU); Media Studies Degree (ZOU); Higher National Diploma in Library and Information Science (Harare Polytechnic); Diploma in Library and Information Science (Bulawayo Polytechnic); Diploma in Education (UZ); Diploma in Personnel Management (IPMZ); Diploma in Salaries Administration (Stallone Consultancy); Certificate in Desk Top Publishing (CCOSA); Certificate in Web Designing (People's College); Certificate in Computer Repairs (People's College).