Introduction

My experience working in a school library in Kenya, led me to the realization the impact libraries can have not only in promoting literacy but also in reaching the underprivileged sectors of society through various partnerships. My aim to return back to Canada was to pursue further studies and equip myself with professional expertise in order to make an appropriate contribution. My affiliation with the Aga Khan Development Network, a non-profit organization with the mission to invest in institutions of higher learning in the developing world, carved the path to pursue a position in the field of academic librarianship and an interest of working in the African context.

In this paper I would like to focus on an international academic reference librarian. I will attempt to provide an historic overview of the profession; explore its trends and challenges and try to identify practical aspects regarding skills and training, ongoing professional development and job prospects.

History of international librarianship

Before the advent of written technology the information specialists in a community were the leaders and elders. They were the guardians and transmitters of information they acquired through life experiences and shared them orally from generation to generation. With the advent of writing and non-print technologies complex forms of organizing records for storage, retrieval and transmission were required. The tasks of protecting and providing this information physically and intellectually became the role of libraries and librarians. As library collections and community of users grew the need for collaboration between communities and countries was inevitable. These were the beginnings of international librarianship.

Glynn (2004) takes us on a detailed historic journey of library cooperation. The ancient period is characterized by the Sumerians in 3600 BCE and the Chinese in the second millennium BCE. These were the early proto-libraries. Larger collections of records appeared in ancient Mesopotamia in the 7th and 8th centuries. An organized system of bibliographic cooperation flourished during the various dynasties in China from the 2nd century BCE to the 2nd century CE. The famous library in ancient Alexandria became the centre of intellectual exchange. The Roman Empire upheld the creation of libraries until their fall. A new period developed in Europe with an exchange between various monastic libraries. In the Middle East the advent of Islam spread its passion for houses of knowledge or Bait-ul ilm. A great expansion of libraries occurred during the Renaissance in Europe. Today the information society has seen its greatest development and network of libraries around the world. The regional, national and international library
associations have taken over the role of information facilitators and promoters in the global arena (Glynn, 2004).

Hiraldo and Pujol (2001) present a different historical perspective to international librarianship. Libraries have developed through the creation of international cultural centers meant to disseminate a countries’ native culture abroad. The sending country is the one offering the services to the receiving country or host country. The Alliance Française, created in 1883, and the Società Dante Alighieri, created in 1889 were the first organizations to develop this idea (Hiraldo & Pujol, p.74, 2001). Other private organizations followed such as the Goethe Institute in Germany in 1925, and the Swedish Institute in 1933. The British Council established in 1934 was the first international cultural organization created by a national government. The culture centers that still exist today emerged in the 50’s and 60’s.

Every cultural center has a library. An estimated number of 700 libraries exist today within cultural centers worldwide. Presently, the Alliance Française is operating in 150 countries. It is funded by the French government to build high quality collections, to offer spacious facilities and modern equipment. The Goethe Institute has 18 centers in Germany and 150 centers in countries around the world. Their libraries offer modern facilities, well planned collections and services. The Instituto Cervantes, created by the Spanish government in 1991, runs 37 centers in 24 different countries with differing sizes and types of collections. It is in the process of updating its collection and introducing information technologies. These centers concentrate on the diffusion of their culture and language (Hiraldo & Pujol, 2001).

The British Council with 207 libraries in 109 countries; the United States Information Agency founded in 1953, with libraries located mainly in embassies; and the Japan Foundation with 12 libraries mostly renovated in the 1990’s are all examples of libraries that offer diverse collections and activities in addition to cultural and language exchanges (Hiraldo & Pujol, 2001).

Even though the objectives of each center may vary according to the needs of the countries they are located in, they are similar in the library services they provide. These include: building and maintaining specialized collections of the language and culture of the sending country; offering materials to support the teaching of their language; serving as information centers; and promoting the exchange of students and professionals of both countries.

Hiraldo and Pujol (2001) fail to mention the motivation behind these centers as being one of promoting self patriotism. However, they can serve as models of information centers to be developed by
the host countries, and as mentioned by the authors these international cultural libraries have benefited many professionals through their exchange programs.

**Challenges and trends:**

According to Curry, Thiessen and Kelley (2002), the one document that outstands in its portrayal of the challenges of international librarianship is Lester Asheim’s book "Librarianship in Developing countries ". Curry et al. emphasize the relevance of Asheim's observations of factors that contribute towards the different progress of libraries in the developing world. These include: "economics, culture, education, societal structure, attitudes towards authority, the impact of colonization and its... overthrow, the predominance of the English language worldwide, religious beliefs, attitudes towards work, low prestige assigned to librarianship and even the climate" (Curry et al., 2002). Based on these factors continues Asheim, one cannot expect these countries to have the same standards as those of Western libraries. In spite of this gap librarians working in these countries can export some ideals of American librarianship. Asheim identifies six characteristics: 1) the conception of the library as an organization of books, 2) the evolution of a library profession, 3) the attitude of service, 4) the function of the library as an education institution, 5) the role of the library in the advancement of intellectual freedom, and 6) the conception of organized information as a public resource and responsibility (Curry et al., 2002).

Within the African context, Ogundipe (1994) argues that despite the concept of librarianship being new to Africa; it has been accepted and integrated by the African culture just as they have adopted the European cars and dress. He remarks that libraries started off as an elitist movement to sustain the intellectual minds of the European immigrants. Critics debate this as being “antithetical to African cultural expression” (Ogundipe, p.245, 1994) since public libraries should be a communal meeting places for cultural exchanges such as the village meetings, under the baobab tree. This view of the concept of libraries being foreign to the traditional oral African societies is supported by Caroline Horn, as mentioned by Curry et al. Horn remarks this unfamiliarity may be indicative of the government’s reluctance to funding libraries as they are unaware of their benefits (Curry et al., 2002).

The background information on the African context provides the international professional with a conceptual framework. Discussing practical issues, Ogundipe (1994) outlines constrains libraries face in Africa: 1) lack of funds, 2) inadequate or outdated materials, 3) lack of adequate equipment and technical knowhow, 4) non-functional buildings with air-conditioning problems, 5) lack of staff in an unfamiliar profession among other issues. Some of the solutions proposed by him are: 1) a strong advocacy movement to bring the issues at the fore front to the appropriate government institutions, 2) identifying
equipment suitable to the local conditions, 3) creating an indigenous market for library equipment, 4) training of staff at all levels, 5) architectural designs conducive to the local climate, 6) incorporating the existing oral literature within the library collection, 7) undertaking literacy programs for large sectors of illiterate population, 8) building collections within economic constraints, and 9) keeping informed of technologies applicable within the native context.

In many ways Asheim and Ogundipe resonate in their views. Factors that Asheim refers to as working against the development of adequate libraries in the developing world are outlined by the practicalities of the situation in Ogundipe’s research. They both allude to the legacies of colonialism. Asheim’s views on the ideals to export are very theoretical while they converge with some of the solutions explored by Ogundipe such as the evolution of the library profession and the libraries’ role as an educational institution in promoting literacy. Asheim’s remarks were made during his travels in the 60’s while Ogundipe’s research was published in 1994; one can conclude that progress in international librarianship is slow and that changes to be effective require committed global partnerships with greater local involvement.

In the academic sphere the challenges being faced are voiced in “Filling Bare Shelves” by Carolyn Sharples, a review presented in Curry et al. (2004). In Sharples’ view most book aid to the developing countries is geared towards children’s literature overlooking academic libraries where journal subscription costs are increasing and libraries are required to cancel them. Another difficulty asserts Sharples is the acquisition of newly published material where the library staff are unaware of what is available. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that developing countries rely heavily on Western sources especially scientific and technical journals. The major area of concern for academic librarians is the lack of local publishers and authors, a vicious cycle phenomenon as where does one start to tackle such a problem. Other issues faced by academic libraries worth mentioning are: copyright issues which may hinder free access; diverse linguistic groups to cater to; foreign currency issues when ordering international materials; lack of scholarly research and of awareness of library advocacy (Curry et al., 2004).

**Job prospects:**

I have considered the academic library job prospects and salaries from the American job market as a starting point and a parallel to the Canadian market. The international market is dependent on the individual countries and their academic institutions. From my experience I have learnt that local
universities do not employ expatriates due to visa restrictions, it is mainly international institutions that would send professionals overseas on renewable or short term work permits.

The American market reports an increase in academic library positions in general. While job placements in 2009 represented 20.7%, in 2010 the academic positions increased to 28.7%. As far as salaries, these remained steady between 2009 and 2010 with a slight increase of 1% from $40,065 to $40,315 (Maatta, 2011). According to the author due to the versatility of reference, these positions are popular in various sectors and have experienced a growth from 15.4% in 2009 to 23.8%. In academic libraries the increase is due to the emphasis on instruction and information literacy changing the nature of reference role. However, we see a drop in salaries from $41,795 in 2009 to $40,759 (Maatta, 2011).

Most current job postings for academic reference librarians in US and Canada are positions requiring more than two years of experience and very few entry level placements were advertised.

From the current jobs posted on the ACU site (http://www.acu.ac.uk/), I examined the head librarian position at the Aga Khan University (AKU) in London, England and the senior librarian job at the University of South Pacific (USP) in Fiji.

AKU outlined a list of responsibilities including: planning and developing policies towards print and digital collections; delivering “customer-focused” library services; providing training in all aspects of library functions; developing information literacy programs for faculty and students; assuming the administration and financial management of the library; and representing the institution at international library forums. AKU stressed the need to work as a team member with other departments. The qualifications included a Masters degree with an IFLA accredited library association (http://www.acu.ac.uk/)

The USP position focused on the managerial functions of the job as well as planning, coordinating and reviewing all aspects of the department. As the AKU description importance was placed on working as a motivating team member. Additionally they required experience in dealing with a multicultural user population, an awareness of current regional and national issues and an understanding of life in a developing country. Qualifications included a Masters degree accredited by the Australian Library and Information Association (http://www.acu.ac.uk/).

In both postings emphasis is placed on: managerial skills, team work, planning and developing services and programs, customer relations, and knowledge of user demographics. The position at AKU requires special knowledge in the area of Muslim Civilizations and fluency in two Middle Eastern languages since the university specializes in Islamic Studies. The position at USP located in a developing
country called for awareness and understanding of local, regional and developing world issues. Equally they required a Masters Degree from a library school accredited by the Association they were affiliated to. It would be advisable to determine the equivalency of one’s credentials before applying for an international librarian position. For librarians with foreign credentials wanting to work in Canada, CLA provides information on determining the equivalency of their degrees (http://www.cla.ca/).

**Professional organizations:**

International library associations play a crucial role in the history of library development in the developing world especially where local or regional associations are inexistent. Their goal is to facilitate agreements and transfer of materials and information in various countries; to promote copyright agreements and postal regulations; to create standards in the creation of bibliographic records; to share information among countries; to publish materials; to facilitate professional and personal exchanges among other functions (Stueart, 2007).

The leading international professional body for librarians is the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions or IFLA. It represents “the global voice of the information professional” as well as “the interests of library and information services and their users” (http://www.ifla.org). IFLA offers information professionals with a comprehensive list of specialty sections. Each section deals with a specific aspect of librarianship and specific regions. The academic reference librarian working in an institution in Africa can benefit from IFLA’s sections dedicated to: “Reference and Information Services”, to “Academic and Research Libraries” and to “Africa”. IFLA offers a subscription to its libjobs listing (listserv: http://www.ifla.org/II/lists/libjobs.htm).

The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) is one of the oldest and largest inter-university networks. It has a strong partnership and networking with African universities. It publishes magazines and scholarly articles related to higher education worldwide. ACU includes a job posting on its site (http://www.acu.ac.uk/member_services/recruitment_and_%20advertising/view?id=6654).

The American Library Association (ALA) is a strong and well networked body; it caters to librarians wanting to work abroad through its International Relations Division (IRD) composed of an International Relations Committee (IRC) established in 1923, its International Relations Office, and its International Relations Round Table (IRRT). The IRC includes an African subcommittee. The Association of Colleges and Research Libraries (ACRL) is one of the divisions with an international relations committee. The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) division and the ACRL division cater specifically to the academic reference librarian. The IRRT provides extensive information
for the global librarian with links on international employment job opportunities and job exchange programs with a section dedicated to Africa (http://www.ala.org).

The Special Interest Group for International Information Issues (SIG/III) established in 1982 facilitates the flow of information and people worldwide. It is the international division of the American Society for Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T). It offers mentorship, newsletters, blogs, job postings and listserv. Through the SIG/III one has access to a comprehensive list of International Organizations with job postings for information professionals. These include the United Nations, UNICEF, World Bank, International Telecommunications Union to mention a few (http://www.asis.org/SIG/SIGIII/).

UNESCO is the leading intergovernmental organization with a significant library program. Its current mandate is to safeguard “endangered institutions and collections of cultural heritage” (Wedge worth, p. 22, 2004). Even though UNESCO funds some library projects in the world most of its library work is pursued jointly with IFLA and national libraries.

For the international librarian working in underfunded institutions access to philanthropic foundations and book donation programs can be a great resource. Among these are: the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Andrew Mellon Foundation, Mortenson Center for International Library Programs and the Rockefeller Foundation. They continue to assist in the development of libraries and information services in underdeveloped regions of the world. Major book donation programs include: Biblionef, Book Aid International, Books for All (a joint project by IFLA and UNESCO) Darien Book Aid Plan and the Sabre Foundation (Stueart, 2007).

Scholarly and professional publications:

Publications for the international librarian: World Libraries formerly known as Third world Libraries is an international online journal focusing on library issues as well as socio-economic development. It is a free peer-reviewed library and information science journal that provides a platform to libraries and information professionals in countries where professional library associations are not available. IFLA Journal covers issues of interest to the international information professional and is published four times a year. The International Information and Library Review is a peer-reviewed journal covering issues of international and comparative librarianship. Bulletin is the ACU member’s newsletter with information on their activities worldwide. Some of their reports and papers are available to all.

Journals catering to the needs of academic and reference librarians: Journal of Academic Librarianship is an international refereed journal publishing articles with a focus on college and
university libraries. *College and Research Libraries* is the official journal of ACRL, a division of ALA and is published bimonthly. *Reference services review* is a “quarterly refereed journal dedicated to reference knowledge and services. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* updates librarians on emerging technological innovations in reference work.

**LIS Courses:**

Many library science scholars and instructors question whether the library school curricula equip the new library professional with their multi-faced roles as managers, team players, webmasters, instructors, or as customer service providers. The courses offered at the University of Toronto ischool reflect a work in progress to adapt to the changing roles of the new information professionals. Following is a list of courses reflecting my personal view of the training an international academic reference librarian should undergo. It is by no means comprehensive as additions to it can complement individual study paths.

Introductory and foundation course cover areas in management and administration; research methods to evaluate service performance; overview of the field and its issues; conducting reference interviews and understanding user needs; cataloging knowledge; and learning the basics of online and multiple database searching (http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/course-descriptions):

1. INF1230H Management of Information Organizations
2. INF1240H Research Methods
3. INF1300H Foundations in Library and Information Science
4. INF1310H Introduction to Reference
5. INF1320H Introduction to Bibliographic Control
6. INF1325H Online Information Retrieval

An in depth examination of some of the areas covered in the introductory level courses:

7. INF2149H Administrative Decision-Making in Information Organizations
8. INF2172H Readers' Advisory: Reference Work and Resources
9. INF2175H Managing Organizational Records
10. INF2127 Collection, Development, Evaluation and Management

Courses with an international perspective and skills required in a developing world setting:

11. INF2125 H Information and Culture in a Global Context
12. INF2137H International Organizations: Their Documents and Publications
13. INF2152H Advocacy and Library Issues
14. INF2309H Reading: Theories, Practices, and International Perspectives
From the comprehensive list of courses only one course covers pedagogy:

15. INF2110H Design and Evaluation of Information Literacy Programs

Courses students can tailor to their studies:

16. INF2010H Reading Course
17. INF 2173H Information Professional Practicum

Every library job description calls for effective writing and communication skills. Courses offered by the School of Continuing Studies:

18. SCS 1120 Professionally Speaking
19. SCS 1914 Professional Writing

Emerging technology workshops organized by the inforum are practical and current:

20. Online collaboration: cloud computing, working with wikis
21. Online content creation: website creation, podcasting with GarageBand
22. Equipment: EBook readers and EBooks, SmartBoard 1, Keystrokes and tricks for Macs
23. Information presentation with Prezi

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have traced the history of international librarianship from the perspective of the need for bibliographic collaboration and the need for cultural exchanges. Asheim’s insights on the challenges of international librarianship and Ogundipe’s practical portrait of African librarianship have prompted me to ask: What does it mean to be an international librarian in a developing country? As implied by Asheim, it would mean to break free from the preconceived ideology of the Western world view; to be accepting of the local belief system by encouraging community involvement; and to be resourceful through participating in and developing partnerships. An ideal candidate would be a professional who can adapt to unexpected challenges while providing the institution with innovative leadership: a daunting task yet a great opportunity.
References


