

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Lesotho

18-04-1996 and 09-08-1999

The starting point of access to information and freedom of expression is the question: why libraries? What is the justification for establishing national, public and academic libraries? One would like to chorus the motto of the then Rhodesia's "National Free Library", which said "Let knowledge be denied no-one" (1). The aim of establishing a library is to collect, protect and preserve information and knowledge. The very act of establishing a library system is to institutionalise free, smooth availability and accessibility of information; to facilitate full utilisation, hence stimulation or more generation of knowledge for all.

Population:	2,078,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 660 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Kingdom
Main languages:	Sesotho and English
Main religions:	Roman Catholic, Protestant - traditional religions
Literacy:	71% (1995)
Online:	0,05% (July 2000)

On the contrary then, non-establishment of a library or a community information service by authorities; inadequate library services and shortage of information for all categories of people, similar to censorship, is tantamount to denial of knowledge, suppression of free flow of information and a crime which should be unacceptable to librarians and information workers who advocate the clarion call of access to information and freedom of expression.

Lesotho has no National Information Policy. The Lesotho National Library Service (LNLS) was started without any Act in 1977. It poorly maintains three district branches, while there are ten districts. The new concept of a community information service is practically non-existent. LNLS attempts to supply books to secondary schools, which are in a position to secure accommodation for the collection. Very few who can afford this condition happen to be schools having teacher-librarians, who received an elective course on School Librarianship offered by the Library Association at the National University.

Consequently, no Lesotho national can claim to have a right to *seek* or *receive* literary information. From where, how? Have they been taught to develop any culture of seeking such information? Cases of Satanic Verses can hardly be news of this environment. The rural communities are the worst hit. The generally poor social infrastructure is their real frontiers. And yet we forget the indigenous knowledge that they possess and would be recorded for libraries if facilities could be provided. Would librarians who are prepared to make information accessible to those people and in mountain areas be entitled to hardship allowance? Would those who are not following the envisaged guidelines of CAIFE be contravening any Code of Ethics? Who can be a watchdog?

Some who do not look at it from this perspective may doubt when I say Lesotho is most likely one of the worst defaulter in Africa; the reason being that inaccessibility to information in itself is hardly ever equated to violation of peoples' rights.

Hence, one can recall isolated cases, for example an incidence of a challenge of Academic Freedom at the National University of Lesotho, where by Order No. 21 of 1989 the Academic Staff Union could easily be banned and some members punished for being critical of the ruling junta of the day. Again Amnesty International may be cited where it rarely reported Lesotho violations of Human Rights. Of course, *Index to Censorship* too, has reported just about three abuses since 1986. These were the deportations of two journalists, Maseko and Mukela, during the military rule of 1986, as well as the politically active priest named Worsnip. (2) This shows that by comparison, the suppression or curtailment of individuals' freedom of expression (previously existing), especially in the political arena, receives more international attention and public outcry than the denial and non-provision whatsoever to the entire populace. Is this not against the code of ethics of librarians and an area requiring more attention of CAIFE ... especially in the Lesotho where the illiterate population is silently untouched by library developments?

I indeed maintain that governments should be made to ratify some kind of a Declaration, just like they now do commit themselves to the Convention on Declaration against all forms of Discrimination against Women (DEDAW) which is used by relevant pressure groups change the course of things. Likewise, library groups which (at least in my country) unfortunately do not sound as audible as other professions, some form of UN (UNESCO) labelled, specific, direct and binding Code should be pushed through by IFLA. Then we can use it to seek funding support and recognition while making information accessible and protecting all positive and constructive freedom of expression in our respective countries and regions CAIFE is in the right direction towards that.

The exponential growth of the number of libraries is a positive expression regarding Intellectual Freedom of Expression.

There is no record to my knowledge for the past twelve months when any citizen's rights to access or use of a library were violated. Neither have libraries been refused freedom to acquire certain material. Yet it would indeed require someone on the scene even to enquire if libraries receiving direct funding from government are allowed to subscribe to notoriously left wing newspapers for instance. These are pertinent issues that would require someone on the scene to verify. As well, Censorship Law for obscene items and as previously stated still stands. But there is no problem with that one. Whereas the picture may appear permissive, it does not necessarily imply there is no intimidation for related activities as enshrined in the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.