

Never be Silent. Three questions from BiS to Shiraz Durrani

- regarding his newly released book *Never be silent; publishing and imperialism in Kenya 1884-1963* (2006, London: Vita Books)

BiS is the acronym of the Swedish organisation Bibliotek i Samhälle (Libraries in Society)

BiS is a socialist association of people working in libraries as well as others with an interest in library issues. According To BiS, it is the objective of libraries to safeguard and develop democracy by:

- supporting freedom of expression and by guaranteeing the provision of information as a base for expressing opinions and social criticism
- being a publicly funded and democratically governed institution, which is developed in a dialogue with its users and the local community
- working in a outreaching, literacy promoting and guiding way, prioritising those facing the risk of ending up on the wrong side of the growing information gap
- actively offering information and literature, which is complementary and alternative to the commercially viable.

BiS was funded in 1969 by students of the Library School in Stockholm. From the very beginning it has issued its journal *bis*, nowadays appearing four times a year. During the first ten years, all work was done in a very decentralised way through numerous branches in Sweden. BiS has still no chairperson, but a national board and an editor of its journal.

From 1991 BiS has been actively involved in solidarity and exchange work in South Africa. BiS has supported the Masizame Resource Center in a township in Eastern Cape and been a part of a national school library project 1997 - 2002, working together with progressive South African counterparts.

BiS has got a website www.foreningenbis.org where the main elements of BiS' work is displayed. During the last three years, a special emphasis has been put on fighting the neoliberal GATS which is a threat to public libraries. The journal has an important role in raising alternative issues and new perspectives on the library in the society.

BiS is part of a international network of progressive library organisations.



Shiraz Durrani at the Training the trainers workshop, Nairobi, July 2006. Photo M.B.

1. Why did you write the book? Your book has the title: “Never be silent”. Why?

The book started as a paper for a Workshop entitled, “libraries and rural development in Kenya”. It was an exploration of the role that information workers should play in ensuring that the information needs of people were met. This was a way of understanding and redefining the social role of librarians in Kenya. That was the first reason for writing the book.

The second reason was to re-interpret the history of Kenya from people’s point of view. A large amount of history has been written and interpreted by those who sought to justify colonialism and imperialism. Facts were often distorted, hidden or misinterpreted. Those who sought to see history from a people’s point of view were not free to carry out research, or to publish their findings. I used secondary sources to give the events a new interpretation. Thus the book seeks to provide an alternative and, from my point of view, an authentic, version of colonialism and resistance to it in Kenya. The history of publishing in Kenya, as an important aspect of social communications, provides a prism for seeing and understanding the reality of social and political struggles in Kenya.

The third reason for writing the book was an act of political activism at a time when there were few democratic avenues for political activists. All progressive political activities in Kenya from around 1965 had to be carried out underground. A new generation of cadres needed to be nurtured in theories of liberation and tested in active struggles. They had to be given a new, Pan African and anti-imperialist world outlook, based on principles of socialism.

A missing element in this process was a lack of appropriate study material. The underground opposition needed progressive material from overseas (e.g. writings of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Castro, Lumumba, Nkrumah, Cabral etc) and organised their supply through underground networks - note that this was before the internet made such material easily accessible. But it also needed material that reflected local history, struggles and achievements. Such material had to be written locally. Thus activists of the underground December Twelve Movement wrote and published *InDependent Kenya*¹ as well as issued its own newspaper, *Pambana*². My publications, including *Never be Silent*, aimed to supply such material for political use. My other publications included a short introduction to Mau Mau³.

The title, "Never be silent" is taken from a liberation song sung by the Mau Mau activists as a way of recording their history, and to organise and mobilise their supporters. The song was:

We will never be silent ⁴

On January 7th we were surrounded at Bahati
by the colonial army.

We will never be silent
until we get land to cultivate
and freedom in this country of ours, Kenya.

Home Guards were the first to go and close the gates
and Johnnies entered while the police surrounded the location.
You, traitors! You dislike your children,
caring only for your stomachs;
You are the enemies of our people.

We will never be silent
until we get land to cultivate
and freedom in this country of ours, Kenya.

2. In a popular movement, what is the role of the professional librarian or information worker?

It is important to see professional librarians in their social context. They are part of a social setup which, under capitalism, is divided into various classes. The information sector, in common with other aspects of life, is in effect a tool of a particular class which uses it to further its class interests. At the same time, classes with less political or economic power are engaged in a constant resistance to assert *their* class interests. The professionals in this context are not neutral. Whether they admit it or not, they are involved in this struggle on one side or another.

A popular movement in such a situation seeks political power to meet the needs of those it represents. A key requirement for their struggle to succeed is control over social information. The information needs of the popular movement are, of course, related to the needs of their struggles. In essence, they need to know everything their enemies know, but in addition they also need to know and understand the reality of the situation from their own point of view, both national and international, so that they draw correct lessons for their struggles. They need scientific and technological information which can further their social struggles as well as provide means of satisfying their material needs. For this to be done, they need to control tools of social communication – printing presses, books, radio stations, ICT, videos, photo documentation, libraries and all the other tools made possible by developments in ICT.

Thus a popular movement needs its activists to have skills to ensure that it can control and use all these technologies – just as they need the skills of lawyers, doctors, peasants and workers.

Professional librarians can contribute to the success of a popular movement by being active in the struggle and contributing their skills to provide informational support for the popular struggle. All the traditional skills of the information professional – acquiring material relevant to advance their struggle, storing, dissemination, cataloguing and classifying information etc – are needed in the struggle. Librarians are the collective information banks of the struggle upon which the organisation can draw.

No popular liberation movement can succeed in achieving its vision without ensuring that its information needs are met. Thus the Mau Mau had a comprehensive information strategy to meet its information and communications needs, as documented in *Never be Silent*. They controlled newspapers, printing presses, teaching programmes; they organised field hospitals and gun factories, they established libraries in secret locations – all of which needed appropriate skills and information. They developed methods of information dissemination and used orature and freedom songs to reach people who could not read or write. They also collected and used intelligence to monitor enemy movement, and battle strength. In all this, the trade union movement played a key role.

The Mau Mau did not have professional librarians as we know them today to do this work. But the need for the librarian's skills was there. In fact it was the activists themselves who became librarians and documented events, wrote and collected information, organised secret libraries in the forests and ensured that correct information reached those who needed it in an appropriate form and at the right time. Today's "professional" librarians can learn much from their example of how to be activist librarians.

Given the stranglehold over mass media globally by a small number of media conglomerates, it is important that alternative information is made available to people in a form and language appropriate to local needs.

At the same time, a popular movement needs to work with other popular movements to strengthen itself. Imperialist forces work globally, forming "coalitions of the willing" to maintain their stranglehold over people, countries and resources. In the same way, popular forces need to work in unity in a global alliance with those struggling against imperialism. Information activists need to take a leadership role in this process of global co-operation of popular forces and facilitate information transfer to bring people and organisations together on the basis of awareness about each other's programmes, visions, experiences, successes and failures.

The vision of a global popular movement, such as the World Social Movement, can emerge only if there is this active information exchange. It is the role of the professional librarian to create networks for such exchanges.

3. "What is the role of ICT in the information provision to popular movements?"

This is tied with the previous question. Popular movements need all the tools they can get hold of in order to achieve their vision. Such tools vary according to the particular stage of the struggle in particular countries. But at every stage there is a need for relevant information to be assessed, collected and disseminated. Given the rapid growth in the amount of information available today, it is no longer possible or practicable to rely on tools in use in previous struggles.

Developments in ICT has created new tools and technologies that can help in collecting and disseminating material from various liberation struggles. The enormous amount of oral and written material generated during the long history of struggles against colonialism in Africa, Asia, Latin America, as well as in Europe and USA can be now be collected, documented and made available more easily with ICT. Similarly documentation on the policies and activities of organisations and leaders active in the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist movements

(before and after independence) need to be made available. With the possibilities opened up by ICT, this can be a manageable task, especially if there is greater cooperation between various popular movements.

One does not expect any organisation to use manual typewriters today to draft their manifestos. Nor can all activists be reached by the traditional postal mail. The enemies that the popular movements are fighting against use technologies that can take people to the moon and Mars. There can be no hope for victory if the movements themselves do not upgrade their tools and technologies to match those of their enemies. One cannot fight modern warfare using catapults. Similarly, one cannot hope to win people's wars by using pen and paper. ICT as a tool for communication is crucial for victory in people's movements. Not only can it provide an efficient and effective means of communication, it can also help to organise its supporters as well as train an army of advanced cadres for new battles.

It is easy today to reach millions of people by the use of emails and text messages within seconds. "Video guerrillas" take pictures of enemy atrocities and broadcast them to the world. Satellite television stations, using people's culture and languages, can help to break the imperialist embargo on people's communications. Radio stations can still be a powerful means of reaching people right in their houses, factories and fields. While the corporate companies seek to use these channels for diverting people's attention away from the reality of their exploitation and the its causes, the popular movements can use them to open people's minds to the reasons for their suffering. They can provide a world outlook that imperialism seeks to block out. In essence, ICT has changed the whole balance in the struggle against corporate globalisation and created a new generation of activists who will help liberate the people of the world.

Shiraz Durrani
09 September 2006

Never ever ⁵

We will never be silent
sang the Mau Mau.

We will never give up
even in death
the fight for what is right
the fight for our rights.

Cuba stands *imara* for forty years and more
Venezuela takes destiny in its own hands

Bolivia joins the march of history
Nepal shows it is not far behind.

Contras and proxy wars no longer work
bombs fail to subdue Iraqi liberation
missiles are turned on oppressors in Lebanon
Afghans cannot be "pacified"; Palestinians just never give up.

The tide of history turns
unrecognised, insignificant changes
portend the demise of the two Bs, making them the has-beens
grim brothers, indeed.

Who can be silent
when the silent cry of the dying child
calls on everyone, everywhere:
never be silent, never

never, never be silent
never ever

Shiraz Durrani
28 August 2006

1 1983. London: Zed Books.

2 Further information about these, and other underground publications is available from: Durrani, Shiraz (1997): The other Kenya: underground and alternative literature. Collection Building. Vol. 16(2) 80-87.

3 Durrani, Shiraz (1986): Kimaathi, Mau Mau's first Prime Minister of Kenya. Middlesex: Vita Books.

4 A Mau Mau liberation song, quoted in Mathu, Mohamed (1974): "The urban guerrilla". Ed. Donald Barnett. Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. LSM Information Centre. pp. 23-24.

5 Published in Information Equality, Africa No. 2 (September, 2006). [Newsletter of the Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group – PALIAct. Available at: <http://www.seapn.org.uk/PALIAct-new.html>].