

all librarians.—*Tim Daniels, Georgia State University.*

The Impact of Technology on Asian, African and Middle Eastern Library Collections. Ed. R.N. Sharma. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow (*Libraries and Librarianship: An International Perspective*, No. 1), 2006. 292p. alk. paper, \$50 (ISBN 0810854481). LC 2006-2784.

“Information poverty” and “sustainability” are important concepts imbedded in the chapters of this book and are most saliently treated in J.J. Britz’s and P.J. Lor’s excellent essay on the role of libraries in combating information poverty in Africa. Information poverty is closely allied to economic poverty: the poorest nations have the least access to information. Sustainability in this context relates to efforts, often financed by Western entities, to resolve issues of information poverty that are abandoned when donor support ceases.

What parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East have in common, at least for the focus of this book, are the colonial legacies and poverty—perhaps itself part of the colonial legacy. Yet, the essays here are two-pronged: they deal with the impact—or lack of it—of electronic information resources in those areas, and the impact of electronic information in area studies in U.S. academic libraries.

It is ironic, but a fact of life, that the countries that could most benefit from access to information are the very ones lacking that access. It is even more ironic that Asian, African, and Middle Eastern studies flourish most significantly well outside those areas, in the U.S. and Western Europe. Britz’s and Lor’s essay posits a model for library and electronic technology development that focuses less on Anglo-American library models than on local realities that look at what kind of information people really need, at the requirements of even the nonliterate populations, and on the informational value of local languages, cultures, and oral traditions.

Asia, Africa, and the Middle East are vast areas with more differences than similarities, even within their individual countries. Thus, grouping China with Nigeria in this book may not be entirely illuminating. And yet we learn of the limitations of information technology in both poor and richer countries, such as the Chinese government’s tight control over electronic news sources and the reliance of some African nations on nonsustainable foreign donors. As some of the essays in this book make clear, the “impact” of technology might better be described as the lack of impact.

The solicited essays in this book are uneven. The ones on Asia, for example, deal more with the development of Internet technology than on the impact of that technology. Rajwant S. Chilana’s essay on South Asian collections and services in U.S. libraries provides useful information on both U.S. and South Asian networks and online resources. But the chapters on Africa focus precisely on the impact of technology. And my colleague Gregory Finnegan’s essay succinctly covers the major impact that Internet technology has made on African studies in the United States and what that has meant for book production in Africa. The states of Africa and the states of the Middle East share more similarities than do the states of Asia. Thus, both Africa and the Middle East are introduced here with “state of the art” overviews, but there is not one for Asia.

Most of these essays deal with the developing countries and area studies in the West in isolation, but James J. Natsis’s piece gives us information on a successful cooperative project between West Virginia State University and the Université Nationale du Bénin, funded by a U.S. government Title VI grant to expand knowledge of foreign languages and cultures. The fact that Benin is in Francophone Africa presented a rare challenge to and opportunity for West Virginia State.

Mohammed M. Aman’s chapter on libraries and collections in the Arab coun-

tries points to the major obstacles to the development of information technology there: low educational standards, government censorship, political instability, meager publishing output, the paucity of computers, and the lack of national information policies. Egypt is somewhat of an exception, as illustrated in the chapter by Sherif Kamel Shaheen, where he indicates that the Egyptian government supports the development of information technology in pursuit of socioeconomic development.

What comes through clearly in the essays in this book is that, although information technology in the developed countries and in the developing countries is very far apart, for area studies in the West they are closely related. The more technology advances in the developing countries, the more area studies in the West will benefit, through the sharing of information.

This book would have benefited from tighter editing, particularly in the standardizing of bibliographic citations. An important aspect of information technology that is ignored in all of the essays except Ali Houissa's on Middle Eastern collections in the United States is the ease of adding vernacular scripts to texts and citations, a significant advance in information technology. No non-Roman scripts appear in this book, because all of the bibliographic citations are in English or have been translated into English. One might reasonably expect a book on information technology development in major regions of the Third World to include citations in the languages of the countries of those regions. The various chapters of the book appear to have been written in isolation, as several initially go over the same ground, explaining what IT is and what libraries do.

The expert observations presented in these essays would be of most benefit to the governments and libraries in the economically underdeveloped nations that are the focus of the essays, but the publisher's price tag of \$50 will almost certainly ensure that the book is not read there.—*Raymond Lum, Harvard University.*

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