

National Library of Mauritius

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Bonjour, Yves Chan Kam Lon, director of the National Library of Mauritius, welcomed us to his office. It was Monday, 30 June 2003 when we took advantage of a holiday in Mauritius to visit and learn more about the role of the National Library in the Republic. We were impressed to learn of the rapid progress that had been made since the passing of the *National Library Act* of 1996. Mr Chan Kam Lon explained to us the many undertakings achieved by the National Library since his appointment in May 1999. The library was inaugurated in December 1999 and open to the public in January 2000.

Under Chan Kam Lon's dynamic leadership the National Library in the past three years has published:

- The *National Bibliography of Mauritius*, now in its second edition of current publications (2003)
- *Directory of Libraries, Documentation Centres and Bookshops in Mauritius* (2000)
- *National Library Customer Charter* (2003)
- four Annual Reports and two Strategic Plans
- Information brochures on legal deposit, disaster plan, copyright, and cataloguing-in-publication
- National Library (Republic of Mauritius) information brochure — *Preserving the past to inform the future*

The *National Library Act* (1996) legal deposit regulations stipulate that six copies of all publications — books, maps, prints, newspapers, periodicals and non-book materials — be deposited in the National Library. Printers and producers face prosecution if they do not follow these regulations.

The *Act* also established the National Library Board to oversee the operations of the National Library. The twelve members of the board include five librarians, the director of Archives and the head of the Library Cadre. The chairperson of the Board must be a person 'of academic distinction'. The library director reports directly to the Board and must be 'a qualified and experienced librarian possessing high academic status'.

The National Library is responsible for collecting any materials relating to, or produced in, Mauritius, or relating to Mauritius but produced overseas. This Mauritiana section includes valuable old newspapers received from both the Mauritius Institute Public Library and the Archives Department. The library has copyright permission to photocopy any material relating to Mauritius to help fill gaps in the collection. The National Library, as part of recording and preserving the nation's cultural heritage, endeavours to acquire private collections as well as published materials.

Raising the profile of the National Library and professional librarianship throughout the country is seen as a high priority. It is through the director's influence that an act of parliament has established the powerful Mauritius Council of Registered Librarians in an Act passed in 2000. The Council acts as an advocate and regulatory body to enhance the library profession throughout the country. Its role is to facilitate the networking and professional recognition in a country where the oral tradition has predominated. This Council advises the government on any matters connected to libraries and librarianship, and no-one may practice as a librarian in Mauritius unless they have registered with the Council.

In preparation for our interview with the director, Mr Ibrahim Ramjaun, a recent graduate from the BA (Library and Information Science) course offered by Charles Sturt University and the University of Mauritius, conducted us on a tour of the library's core collection, reading room, bindery, newspaper preservation and microfilm units. We were privileged to see a photocopy of the first government publication in Creole, the *Abolition of slavery*.

There is an impressive collection of newspapers dating from 1777, as well as material from the French and British colonial periods and current parliamentary publications. The *2003–2005 Strategic Plan* makes provision for the establishment of an online public access catalogue by 2004 and the development of national automation standards. The National Library is open six days a week to all users over the age of eighteen, although secondary students may seek admittance if supported by their principals. The library also answers reference questions received by telephone, fax or e-mail. Limited free internet access is offered to users.

Advocacy is a core activity directed at stakeholders including government departments, the press, industry, cultural organisations, international agencies, local printers and publishers, booksellers, authors and the general population.

Outreach activities have included an Open Day, World Book Day exhibition when all bookshops were open and agreed to sell books at reduced prices, annual school essay competitions, special school programs as well as services to needy children and planned regular exhibitions throughout the island.

Mr Yves Chan Kam Lon has provided vigorous and visionary leadership. In his role as director, and as chairperson of the Mauritius Council of Registered Librarians he has striven to raise and uphold professional standards of librarianship throughout the island. His presidency of the Banque Internationale d'Information sur les Etats Francophones (BIEF) ensures close links with the international scene.

Please see <http://ncb.intnet.mu/mac/nlibrary/index.htm> for further information about the National Library (Republic of Mauritius). ■

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