

## Challenging its imperial origins: towards decolonising SOAS Library

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### Introduction

This chapter outlines the ongoing process of decolonising the library at SOAS, University of London (otherwise known as the School of Oriental and African Studies). It deals first with the history of SOAS and its library, highlighting its deep colonial roots, and secondly gives a narrative of decolonisation activities undertaken in the library since late 2019.

Decolonisation, which has been discussed and defined in great detail in other chapters of this book, is often conflated with diversification (c.f. Makhubela, 2018; Blackwood, 2020). Let us first assume that this conflation is correct. SOAS Library, since its inception, is fortunate enough to hold a vast array of indigenous material from around the globe (particularly Asia, Africa and the Middle East). One can therefore say that SOAS Library is extremely diverse, and that its material represents a wide range of languages, communities and cultures from across a vast swathe of the globe, particularly those of developing countries in the Global South (for want of a better term). Diversification is hardly necessary when it comes to SOAS' collections; many of our staff are non-white/Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), and we already have a large network of overseas contacts from whom we purchase our acquisitions, valuable knowledge which has been built up over decades. In light of this, some may be puzzled to learn that decolonisation is on the library's agenda at all. Some might consider SOAS Library fortunate – does this not all imply that half the legwork of decolonisation is already done?

Of course, we know that diversification and decolonisation are not synonymous terms; and that, while diversification may be part of the decolonisation process, simply having a diverse collection, filled with indigenous voices, is only a fraction of that process. SOAS Library is not exempt from the need for decolonisation – far from it, in fact.

We possess many of the *tools* of decolonisation - but as far as our everyday ingrained practice at SOAS Library is concerned, it is not generally informed by a knowledge or a critical appreciation of decolonisation. While the goal of decolonisation is certainly to have it embedded within our everyday practice, such that it is no longer noticeable, the practices within SOAS Library that might be considered hallmarks of a decolonisation process are most certainly not so. They are the relics of age-old structures that are, in fact, deeply colonial, and the everyday business of librarianship means that one is barely cognizant of that fact. A process of decolonisation must surely mean an awareness, if not a constant reflection on how such systems come to be, and our awareness of SOAS's colonial past can inform our work with our diverse library collections, how we continue to build them, and how we present them to the world.

It is worth noting that while SOAS Library does not formally frame its decolonising efforts within the rubric of critical librarianship, this chapter does approach decolonisation from that lens. Here, the definition used by Nicholson and Seale (2018, 2) is specifically used: '[critical librarianship] uses a reflexive lens to expose and challenge the ways that libraries and the profession "consciously and unconsciously support systems of oppression," thereby pursuing a socially just, theoretically informed praxis'. As part of an institution that is both colonial and yet possesses many of the tools of decolonisation by nature of its regional and ethnic specialisms, it is especially important to acknowledge and challenge the deeply embedded colonial underpinnings of SOAS Library. It is also important to reflect upon the tools at our disposal, and how we may best use them

to combat the systems of oppression that exist without our space. To put this process into context, it is therefore important to briefly consider the history of SOAS itself.

### SOAS – a brief history

It is not a secret that SOAS, like many institutions of its era, is one deeply rooted in Britain's colonial endeavours. Its *raison d'être*, one might add, was to explicitly aid in those endeavours. As Brown, in the only book dedicated entirely to the history of the School, asserts: 'the School was established principally to train the colonial administrators who ran the British Empire in the languages of Asia and Africa. Founded in 1916 as the School of Oriental Studies, the institution was established with an explicitly imperial purpose' (Brown, 2016, 1). Africa would be added in 1938, after the Rockefeller Foundation promised a grant of £3000 annually to go towards the research of that continent in 1931 (Lodge, 1968, 93). Its inception came as a response to an awareness that Britain was lagging behind its continental counterparts in its study of the 'Oriental' languages, particularly Germany, which was a rival 'in commercial interests and Oriental expansion' (from the Reay Report, Appendix 1, 1909; cited in Lodge, 1968, 85). It was also in response to a recognition that Colonial Office officials would not be instructed in the language of the region they were to be posted in *before* they were shipped out, but by local teachers once they had arrived. The founding of a homegrown school would provide the necessary language education before officials reached their eventual destination. But the Reay Committee, which released its report on the need for such an institution in 1909, considered a much longer list of potential beneficiaries of such a school:

...officials being prepared for service in the East and in Africa...; military naval officers being trained as interpreters; commercial men; those wishing to pursue Oriental scholarship...; students from, in particular, India who wished to study the literature of their own language or to learn another Oriental language; medical practitioners, especially women, who intended to practise in India; missionaries; and officials, military and naval officers, and missionaries on leave (Brown, 2016, 14).

Here we can see the whole gamut of imperialist endeavour represented. However, it is worth noting, as Brown does, that this imperial training never reached the scale it was originally intended to. This is excepting the period of the Second World War, when finally efforts were made to fulfil this founding vision for the School. Nevertheless, it took a significant amount of time for the war-time government to actually utilise the School as a language training ground for the war effort, and thus its teaching effort was not as organised or effective as the School itself had hoped, at least as far as we know from the Japanese language classes offered at the time (Kornicki, 2018).

The School, then, did not quite fulfil the imperial dreams that engendered its creation. Nevertheless, it is a child of that imperial agenda, and of its time. Even as the decades passed, and SOAS's language instruction was outstripped by its instruction in the social sciences – law, politics, economics, anthropology, and so on – its foundation as a site of imperial language training gave 'the School's historians... political scientists, anthropologists, and economists, confidence that they possessed unmediated access to the beliefs and perceptions of the peoples and cultures that they were studying, enabling them to speak directly, both literally and figuratively, to and for Asia, Africa, and the Middle East' (Brown, 2016, 3-4). Despite Brown's claim that these scholars have become more self-reflective of this position in more recent years – and despite a general perception of SOAS as an institution that is radical and politically active – internally there is still a perception that SOAS is in some respects exempt from the need to decolonise, as a recent internal report by the Decolonising SOAS Working Group suggests:

...there was a feeling amongst some colleagues that some of the programmes offered at SOAS were inherently 'decolonised' through their regional or methodological focus, for example courses on Art History of non-western Regions or non-mainstream economic approaches (Decolonising SOAS Working Group, 2020, 6)

From this we can see the very real challenge SOAS faces, as a colonial institution, an institution that specialises in the languages and cultures of previously colonised regions, and as an institution that enjoys a reputation as a home for socially and politically active students and staff. In 2016, the Decolonising SOAS Working Group was created, in order to meet that challenge, and in direct response to the wider 'Decolonising the Curriculum' movement. The aim of the group is nothing less than to decolonise SOAS, not merely through 'cosmetic' approaches, but by being 'concretely focused on transforming praxis within our teaching and learning, our research, our collaborations, our institutional culture and our external partnerships' (Sabaratnam, 2018, 1), both collaboratively and collectively with the academic and student body.

### **SOAS Library**

The library was considered an essential part of SOAS from the very outset, with the 1909 Reay Report suggesting that 'all the Oriental books now at University College and King's College would be concentrated' in this library (Reay Report, 1909; cited in Lodge, 1968, 85). The School, when it took up its first residence in the buildings of the London Institution (for the Advancement of Literature and the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge) in Finsbury Circus, inherited that institution's library. The collection was in bad shape, with minimal cataloguing having been done. Most of its content was not relevant to the mission of the School. Therefore, it was agreed that books from this collection would be exchanged for books on the 'Oriental' subjects from the University of London. The exchange took far longer than anticipated, due to the state of the London Institution library whose collections had been boxed up so the size and contents were poorly known due to the lack of cataloguing. Apart from this, the library relied heavily on donations, as it still does today.

Since 1961, and under the recommendation of the Hayter Report, SOAS Library has acted as a National Research Library, and is provided with special funding under that status (Spina, 2010). Thus, it serves not only the SOAS community, but also the public, and overseas patrons. Its current size is estimated at around 1.3 million volumes (SOAS Library, 2021); this does not include electronic items, or material housed in its offsite stores. For an in-depth history of the library through to the 1960's, Lodge (1968) gives an excellent overview.

Let us now turn, with a decolonial lens, to some individual aspects of SOAS Library.

#### *Metadata, classification & cataloguing*

As Crilly (2019a, 9) notes, '[c]lassification techniques form part of [...] epistemic control'. At SOAS, we use more than one classification system – modified Dewey, for the most part, with some in-house systems. The modified Dewey system adds regional/language codes as a prefix, thus allowing the classmark to be shortened, as the regional facets can be stripped out. Each region is given a code – for instance, CC for China, CCLA for Shanghai, CCX for Taiwan; KK for Hindi, KI for Gujarati; VK for Tanzania, VP for Francophone West Africa; and so on. The in-house classification systems are reserved for the Art & Archaeology collection, and the Chinese language collection. Suffice it to say that the classification systems SOAS employs have been criticised for being too complex and impermeable. Its classification by region can be problematic, especially when one

considers territories whose borders are contested or controversial. For instance, some signage has been defaced within the library in the past, with regards to Tibet's status as an autonomous region of China. As seen in the documentary, *Change the Subject* (2019), it is the same case with subject headings (SOAS uses the Library of Congress Subject Headings). As librarians, we are often not aware of the trauma we can inflict on patrons through the classification systems we choose.

SOAS has considered reclassifying its collections by stripping away regional codes, but this does not mitigate the inherent Euro/Anglo/US-centrism of the Dewey system, and in any case, the plan was shelved due to a lack of funds and manpower. However, the library is now turning to decolonising its subject headings, which, due to the limited functionality of our library management system, have not been updated for several years now.

### *Acquisitions*

One strength of the library is the sizeable network of overseas vendors and suppliers that we have developed over the years. This has been vital in allowing us to build collections rich in indigenous literatures. These relationships were built in part by previous generations of subject librarians reaching out to publishing houses or organisations overseas (Stevens, 1983), or going on book-buying tours (Colvin, 1976). While most libraries can no longer afford the luxury of book-buying tours, they are in many ways essential in the discovery phase for new sources of indigenous material. As many developing regions are still not online, local publications, be they amateur or otherwise, are essentially invisible to the West, and it is these publications, and the voices they champion, I would argue, that are vitally important to the decolonisation process. For many books such as these, SOAS has relied on donations, both currently and historically, but these are by their nature ad hoc and inconsistent.

Nevertheless, SOAS benefits greatly from its overseas contacts, and we have begun work on putting a list together for other libraries to take advantage of.

### *Archive & Special Collections*

There is great synergy between the library and Special Collections: much of the material in the main library collection is old or rare enough to be considered part of Special Collections. Indeed, part of the background business of the library is to transfer this material between the collections. One of the founding collections of the library, donated by UCL in 1922, is the Morrison Collection of Chinese books. Robert Morrison (1784-1834) was the first Protestant missionary to China, and this rare and unique collection was part of an effort on his part to collect cheap and affordable books on every subject during the Qing period. These books rapidly deteriorated, are very scarce now, and are of great historical interest (Wood, 2014, 29). Another collection of great historical value is the ex-libris of Sir Reginald Johnston, former SOAS professor, and English teacher to the last Emperor of China, Puyi 溥儀 (1906-1967). To take these collections as an example, neither consist of stolen or looted property, and the library takes great pains not to ingest such material where its provenance is discernible. But what these collections do hold testament to is the colonial and imperial context of their background, which it is impossible to extricate from the objects themselves. These objects, these collections, are a chance through which to assess, evaluate and critique our colonial past – if there is the will and the awareness to do so. Yet rarely have SOAS's collections been approached from this angle. Our large collection of missionary archives, while perhaps highlighting the colonial expansionist intentions of the British government, can also shed light on how missionary organisations 'led vigorous campaigns to protect the land rights and territorial claims of the people they served' (Rayner, 2014, 54). This is not to deny the condescending benevolence with which they

may have done so, but to highlight that such resources give a wider and richer understanding of colonial (and decolonial) epistemologies.

Another problem is that of provenance. There are many parts of our Special Collections – particularly the early ones – that lack proper documentation of provenance. This leads us to a dilemma when trying to assess whether an item has been unlawfully obtained or not. When one considers the case for repatriation (or restitution) of such material, with such a lack of documentation, it often is not possible to know to whom it should be returned. Part of the problem may be solved by digital repatriation/restitution – but this too has its pros and cons. Baschiera (2020) has called for SOAS's Swahili documents to be returned, noting that those that are old enough to be considered 'artefacts' should be housed in museums from their originating country. She praises digitisation efforts yet notes the access difficulties often encountered in developing countries, suggesting that we 'explore how the digital collections can be better shared with the people and institutions of East Africa, especially Kenya and Tanzania' (Baschiera, 2020, 48). On the other hand, Davis (2019) has a much more cautious approach to repatriation/restitution, raising several points of concern, including the risk of splitting up collections, existing scholarship becoming unverifiable, and copyright and licensing impediments. This is in addition to pointing out the internet access disparities which exist in many developing countries; open access is not the solution to all knowledge dissemination inequalities, as Istratii and Porter (2017) note. Instead, Davis suggests solutions such as adequate bursaries or scholarships to fund travel and accommodation for archival research – for more on this, her paper is well worth reading.

### *The library space*

As Crilly (2019b, 88) and others have asserted: 'The academic library is currently a White space'. SOAS Library is lucky enough to have many BAME staff (54% at January 2021; it must be noted that several BAME staff were lost during the 2019 restructure). This is due in part to the need for regional and language expertise. While not all languages can be represented, it is validating and welcoming for many students to engage with staff in their native languages.

However, SOAS needs to consider other ways in which it can physically decolonise its space, and access to its materials. As mentioned above, how does the way we physically arrange and signpost our collections affect students? What parts of our collections do students feel are inadequate in representing their identities, cultures, backgrounds? Is the library itself welcoming or intimidating – or even offensive – to students who come from BAME, low-income, and/or working-class backgrounds? And let us not forget the virtual space either, especially during a pandemic that has forced learning and teaching to be conducted online. It is well known that some students from these backgrounds are less likely to have access to stable broadband internet connections. How does this affect their ability to access our e-resources?

These are questions that SOAS Library has not yet fully asked, let alone answered, and it is necessary for staff to listen to the voices of students in order to address the structural inequalities within the library that they may not have thought of. This has been essential in other instances of library decolonisation, such as that outlined by Clarke (2020, 150).

### **The Library Decolonisation Group**

The SOAS Library Decolonisation Operational Group began as an idea which was born during the inaugural meeting of CILIP's BAME network in September 2019. Attending this meeting brought

to my attention how far behind SOAS Library was compared to other university libraries with regards to decolonisation. This seemed incongruous, considering the global nature of the library's holdings, its colonial background, and the work already achieved by its host institution via the Decolonising SOAS Working Group. If anything, SOAS Library should have been a leader in the effort to decolonise libraries, but there was not even a whisper of the word within the library itself. This gave me the impetus to remedy this oversight and work to bring this group together.

The group was finally formed in the late autumn of 2019, holding its first meeting in December of that year. Despite a major restructure of the library that unfortunately saw many of our BAME staff leave, one positive fallout was the creation by library management of several working/task-and-finish groups that allowed for a self-reflexive evaluation of the library's structures and services that had not previously been undertaken for many years. At this point, I saw the opportunity to propose setting up a decolonisation group, which would finally put this important process formally on the library's agenda. This proposal was approved, and the group was quickly promoted from a task-and-finish group status to a more appropriate operational group status.

It should be noted that the work of the group – and indeed the group itself – is not ratified by all library senior managers, and therefore holds what I consider to be a 'semi-grassroots' status. The group was lucky enough to have some supporters that agreed to its formal inclusion within the working/task-and-finish group structure. Nevertheless, its membership is largely informal at present, though inclusive, and its agenda (as yet) is not considered by management as part of the core business of the library. I am reminded of my early discussion with Elizabeth Charles, Assistant Director of Birkbeck Library, on how to set up a decolonisation group, and her advice to 'start from the bottom if you need to – don't wait for approval from the top'. This was excellent advice, and I would echo it to anyone else who is considering a similar initiative.

Having been approved, the group's work was almost immediately stymied by three significant events: 1) the UCU (University and College Union) strikes during February 2020; 2) the COVID-19 epidemic, which as of this writing still continues, and; 3) another major restructure during the summer of 2020 which saw yet more colleagues either leave the library or be transferred to other departments.

One of our first endeavours was to create a small, 'pilot' exhibition for LGBTQ+ History Month, as a way of seeing how we might be able to put together a similar exhibition for Black History Month later in the year. This included a display of books, DVD's, and a slideshow of streaming videos available within our collections. The physical materials were selected collaboratively by all regional and subject librarians, including books on sex, gender and LGBTQ+ topics in a wide array of different languages from across the regions collected at SOAS. These materials were free for patrons to pick up and browse on the spot, or to take out on loan. A link was also provided for patrons to give feedback on the display. Unfortunately, the exhibition took place during the UCU strikes, while there was minimal footfall in the library; and while Reader Services staff did see the books being borrowed, there was nowhere near the engagement we had hoped for, and no meaningful data could be gleaned from the pilot.

Soon thereafter COVID-19 struck, and all staff had to work from home. Planned activities had to be put on hold while members got to grips with new ways of working, as well as the monumental task of delivering basic resources remotely. The situation highlighted another problem with decolonisation work in a digital era – that of the digital provision of indigenous materials. The majority of the library's collection is made up of texts that are rare or unique – some being the only copies available in Europe (or, indeed, the world) and a vast amount of texts only exist in print form.

The digital provision of texts outside the US/Anglo/Euro-centric world is not extensive or stable: therefore, there was a high demand for us to deliver print texts to patrons, largely satisfied by our Click & Collect service which has run throughout the pandemic. However, there is still a struggle to provide access to patrons who cannot travel to campus to use the service. Scanning has been used to cover requests of materials that do not have a digital equivalent – which was challenging as staff members could not read some indigenous resources.

During the summer of 2020, SOAS was hit with another blow – a major restructure, the second in 18 months, that saw more staff losses and significant disruption. Again, the work of the group was interrupted, although we did have dislocated discussions during this period. One initiative that we discussed was decolonising our metadata, in particular tackling out-of-date and offensive subject headings. This is still a work in progress, largely because the functionality of our open source library management system (Kuali OLE) does not allow for global edits of subject headings (it does not house authority records), and any such work would involve exporting and manipulating the data in a third party programme. This point highlights an important consideration for systems librarians in the selection of LMS's. We have found that technology itself can be either a powerful tool or a hindrance in the decolonisation process. Even open source software should not be accepted “uncritically” (Barron and Preater, 2018, 106).

Another initiative discussed was a way in which SOAS could give our research back to the communities that were the subject of that research. This would involve, of course, the translation of that research into the languages of those communities, which was no easy barrier to surmount. The idea was to have this research hosted in *Decolonial Subversions*, a new, open access, online journal launched by SOAS academic, Romina Istratii. The work of contacting scholars who would like to have their work (or a summary of it) translated (or translate it themselves) and facilitating the project would be done by the library's Scholarly Communications team. However, the restructure saw Scholarly Communications move out of the library, and discussions on the project stall due to the disruption of the restructure. An important development, however, was that the group became one of the Decolonising SOAS Working Group's newly formed 'clusters', responsible for all library-related decolonisation work. Thus, happily, the group was now formally a part of the wider SOAS decolonisation initiative.

It was only in the winter of 2020, a full year after the decolonisation group had begun, that its work began again in earnest. For that entire year, members had been working on its Terms of Reference document, attempting to clarify what its aims were and what its remit was. After many drafts and rewrites, this was finally published in January 2021 (SOAS Library Decolonisation Operational Group, 2021). The aims of the group are as follows:

1. The decolonisation of our metadata, including reviewing and updating our subject headings, and looking to improve our classification systems where possible
2. Continuing to reach out to publishers and suppliers from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and supporting small publishers that encourage voices from the heart of these regions
3. Working with departments and people throughout the SOAS community, to build reading lists that reflect indigenous authors, and engage with knowledge from across the globe, not merely the English-speaking West
4. Facilitating the dissemination of our research to those who are the subjects of our research, particularly in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East

5. To champion digital repatriation or restitution through the SOAS Digital Collections, and to work towards other forms of restitution, where appropriate
6. To assist in reviewing acquisition policies, especially in regards to donations, that will build a robust system for tracking the provenance of our collections; to refer new donations to the Collections Committee where appropriate; and to review the provenance of sensitive items already within those collections
7. To support our student body in the de-centring of Euro- and Anglo-centric epistemological structures by facilitating, as far as is possible, access to indigenous resources from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East
8. To work towards the decolonisation of our library space and collections, and access to that space and collections
9. To work with our colleagues in other academic libraries to encourage/facilitate mutual sharing of best practice, knowledge of working with Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and to collaborate with them in the decolonisation process
10. To involve the wider community in the decolonisation process, through engagement with, and access to, our collections

It is important to add that these aims are not the means to the end of a linear process. Decolonisation is a dynamic process, and as the group navigates, and critically reflects upon, its practice, these goals may be subject to modification. None of us claims to be expert in what it means to decolonise; but we are dedicated to learning what it means through an ongoing journey, both within and without our home institution.

### **The future**

Despite existing for over a year now, the work of SOAS Library's Decolonisation Operational Group is still very much only just beginning. There are many challenges that face us. These challenges may not be easily met. We face technological challenges in updating, and in some cases modifying, subject headings. We have only just begun to engage with the Students Union about access to the library space. There is work, such as that on giving back the School's research to the communities we have studied, that was disrupted by the pandemic and other outside forces, and which needs to be continued. So far, our work has largely been 'driven by the individual activism of those staff engaged in the initiative' (Clarke, 2020, 153), but we are slowly beginning to weave ourselves into the wider institution, primarily through the Decolonising SOAS Working Group. With our newly published Terms of Reference, we now have a solid foundation to build upon.

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