

Research on the British Library's African-language printed books collections

This fellowship offers the opportunity to engage with a little-researched aspect of the British Library's collections. Printed holdings of African-language material, whether published in Africa or elsewhere, cover well over 100 languages and comprise perhaps 7,000–8,000 items. These items date mostly from the 20th and 21st centuries, although some were published as early as the 19th century or even before. Most are books, although there is also some African-language material among serials and newspapers. The largest collections (in roman script) are in Hausa, Igbo, Somali, Sotho, Swahili, Xhosa, Yoruba and Zulu.

The fellowship will sit within the Asian and African Collections of the British Library, reporting to the Lead Curator for Africa. For the purposes of this fellowship, we wish to concentrate on one or more of the following five languages: Hausa, Xhosa, Swahili, Yoruba and Zulu. Applications from candidates with skills in Igbo and Sotho, which are the smallest of the collections listed here, will be considered should there be insufficient applications from candidates with skills in our primary areas of interest.

This fellowship builds on recent work on the British Library's Somali collections, which encompassed both collection research and community engagement. We would like the Chevening Fellow to research one or more of these language collections and their history, gaining a picture of the significance, and the research and creative potential, of what we have. The successful candidate will identify gaps and work on possible sources of new supply. The Fellow will engage with speakers of and specialists in the relevant language(s) in the UK, delivering engagement and public events, as well as building the British Library's links with potential partners in Africa. The fellowship may also lead to a number of other outcomes, including specifying improvements to catalogue records; preparing the ground for the digitisation of selected African-language items; and creating new web pages.

Overall, the Fellow will play a key role in opening up our African-language collections to a variety of users, and building those collections.

The successful candidate will gain experience of working in the UK's national library, developing an understanding of the Library's activities and strategy. They will have an opportunity to develop existing skills, and learn new ones, in a number of areas including library acquisitions, research, and community engagement. They will also have a chance to build more general skills such as public speaking and report-writing.

Key Responsibilities

- Work with British Library curators to develop an in-depth understanding of the relevant language collection(s).
- Develop a timetable and plan of work for the year that includes a balance of research, engagement and promotional work.
- Work to identify gaps in the collection and select items to fill these gaps.
- Play a leading role in the development and delivery of community engagement and other events. These will include at least one community engagement event. In addition, the Fellow will have the opportunity to work to create an event (in cooperation with BL staff) to publicise the collections to a specific or general audience; this could for example be composed of academics, writers, translators, students, or all of these.
- Develop, and share with BL staff, relevant professional contacts in Africa, which could form the basis for partnership working and/or supply information needed to understand where copyright lies for specific items.
- Develop, and share with BL staff, other contacts in the field in the UK and internationally.
- Publicise the relevant language collection(s) as widely as possible, through digital and other means.
- Use your own language and cultural skills through the above and other activities.
- Work cooperatively with curators and other relevant staff in the British Library as appropriate.

Deliverables

- To provide an in-depth report on the language collection(s) targeted for research.
- To identify gaps in the collections and to work on acquiring new items in the relevant language(s).

- To develop links between the British Library and authors, publishers, libraries, academics and other significant contacts in the country/ies where the language(s) in question is spoken.
- To develop other relevant contacts.
- To organise at least one community engagement event, in cooperation with existing community engagement staff at the Library.
- To creatively develop other engagement and outreach work, e.g. through organising a second event for a specific audience.
- To promote the collections through BL blogs and social media platforms.

Candidate requirements

We are looking for someone who combines strong language skills with experience of research and, if possible, knowledge of library acquisitions.

- Degree in a relevant subject (e.g. languages; linguistics; literature; history; anthropology, or another subject in the arts and humanities)
- Good knowledge of at least one of: Hausa, Xhosa, Swahili, Yoruba or Zulu. Candidates must be fluent in the language(s) and able to read and write it competently. Candidates with good skills in a closely related language (e.g. Ndebele for Xhosa and Zulu) may also be considered if they can demonstrate their skills in one of the priority languages. Candidates with the required skills in Igbo or Sotho may also be considered.
- Excellent written and spoken English
- Familiarity with archival material or library collections (experience of searching library catalogues is essential)
- Strong computer skills including Microsoft Office suite
- Ability to work methodically, with attention to detail

Individuals must be residents in their home country at the time of making their application. Applicants from the following countries will be eligible: Nigeria; South Africa; Tanzania; Zambia; and Zimbabwe.