

# Profile: Tirong arap Tanui



Dr Tirong arap Tanui is the University Librarian at Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya, and known to your Editor from a British Government consultancy project at Moi University – undertaken by a team from Loughborough University between 1990 and 1996. In 2007 a group of the original consultants were invited back to Moi to see how things have moved on. It was also an excellent opportunity to write a rather unusual profile for *Serials*.

Tanui was born in 1952 to a very poor rural family in the semi-arid district of West Pokot, Kenya, some 200 kilometres north of Eldoret. His father had two wives – Tanui had 20 brothers and sisters – and he was his mother's eighth child. His early childhood days were spent herding cattle until, at the age of six, he started attending a missionary primary school – a round walking trip of 16 miles a day! Starting school was a revelation. He quickly fell in love with reading although the school possessed very few reading materials – he tells how he hoarded old notes, half burnt-out notes collected from the rubbish dump and discarded written documents which he hid in the wattle walls of the mothers' kitchen and communal children's hut to read at home. In 1968 the Kenyan Government established the first secondary school in the district and Tanui was selected along with 25 of the brightest children from his region to attend the new school. However, it was a long way from home and he had to live with another family near the school for four years. Interestingly, the family he lived with eventually became his parents-in-law in 1980. He married their daughter Mary and they now have four children (two girls and two

boys), all currently studying at universities in Kenya.

He completed his secondary education in 1971 with good exam grades and was anxious to continue in higher education and become a teacher. However, his application failed due to his papers being 'lost' and suddenly he was faced with having to find a job. So, his first job was as a road construction labourer. After that he joined the Kenyan Prisons Service as a warder, working at Kisumu Main Prison for three years. Then he saw a newspaper advertisement for a library attendant at Kenya National Library Service and was delighted to be appointed in 1975. He used the opportunity to enrol as a private candidate in higher education, finally securing a European Union award to go to study in the UK where he obtained a BA in Librarianship from Liverpool Polytechnic in 1983.

He joined the library staff of Moi University in 1985 as an Assistant Librarian. The University had only been in existence for one year – it started life in a country hotel and the library had 250 books borrowed from Nairobi University Library. However, the University began to expand very rapidly and it became clear to Tanui and his colleagues that they needed to lobby very hard for improvements to the library service. Using his contacts in the UK, Tanui and his colleagues succeeded in gaining the interest of the British Government and in 1986 a team of British consultants visited to undertake a feasibility study for a new library building. Things moved rapidly on from that point and in 1988 Margaret Thatcher became the first British Prime Minister to visit Kenya. She came to Moi University and

*The Margaret Thatcher Library,  
Moi University*



guaranteed seven million pounds for the design and construction of a new library building. Tanui was given the job of overseeing the project, working with the team of British consultants led by Prof Tony Evans from Loughborough University. Amazingly, Tanui also found time in 1988/89 to take study leave to do a masters degree at Aberystwyth University and in 1997 started his PhD on a part-time basis (he completed it in 2006); in 1990 he was promoted to Deputy University Librarian and in 1993 to University Librarian.

The Margaret Thatcher Library opened in 1994 and was a showcase for academic libraries in Africa. The seven million pounds not only covered the design and construction of the impressive building but also funded one million pounds' worth of book and journal purchases and ten placements for library staff to improve their qualifications. Thirteen years later the Library is still one of the most impressive buildings on campus – it has worn extremely well (unlike the road to the campus which had deteriorated very badly, a very uncomfortable ride!). The library budget is tight; in 2007/08 the total budget was equivalent to £33,000, which covers 166 staff salaries, 11 separate branch libraries (the newest one having recently opened on the Moi University campus in Nairobi) as well as IT provision, books and journals. But electronic resource provision is growing – mainly due to consortium purchasing among Kenyan libraries and negotiations and deals available from organizations such as INASP (The International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications) and HINARI (Health Internetwork Access to Research Initiative).

Tanui is pleased that the status of librarianship in his country is improving. It took a long time for Kenyan librarians to adapt to ICT due to both lack

of expertise and lack of funding. But the impact of many UK- and US-trained librarians returning to their country with new knowledge and skills and now the new crop of 'home grown' librarians (Moi University has its own School of Information Sciences which works closely with the Library) means that standards are rising. This, coupled with the growth of the Internet which took off once telecoms were de-regulated in 2002, has changed the face of libraries. Tanui is passionate about quality service provision, customer focus and bringing a business attitude to library management. The old idea of 'a safe job for life' is slowly disappearing and he works hard to motivate his staff to be innovative and dynamic. Change may be a bit slow from his point of view – but change is certainly happening.

Although librarianship is his first passion, education in Kenya (where many millions of people still live in abject poverty on less than \$1 US per day) comes in a close second. And to prove this, and to "give something back to the community", he and his wife Mary set up a school in 2000. They bought a plot of land, built some school rooms and started the Lessos Educational Centre with a handful of pupils. The school has now expanded, further plots of land have been purchased and they now have 420 pupils ranging from the age of 3 to 14. It is a private school with the fees paying for a headmaster and several teachers and the general running costs – a common model in Kenya. His wife (an ex-teacher) is the School Manager and each term they also have three gap-year students from the UK who help out with the teaching. It is a truly delightful place, the students are bright and happy and above all they are achieving excellent exam results. Tanui has indeed moved on from his first job as a road labourer.