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A Tale of Two Conferences – *Cuba Style*

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Introduction

The past few years have seen a marked increase in the level of interest about libraries in Cuba. Twelve years ago, a rare glimpse was given in an American Libraries article (1) which piqued some peoples interest, but travel restrictions at that time left many interested in visiting but having no way to do so. However, a relaxing of travel restrictions under the Clinton administration permitted ‘people to people’ and cultural exchanges, thus allowing more people to get a look at this country through formal tours. Several successful library tours were organized and led by people such as Rhonda Neugebauer from U.C. Riverside, Susan Weber from Vancouver, B.C., and Joyce Holmes of Friendship Tours (also from Vancouver B.C.). Much of the impetus for the organization of these tours, was in fact a reaction to several writings and e-mail posts by Robert Kent, of the ‘Friends of Cuban Libraries’ who made multiple claims of harassment and imprisonment of so-called ‘Independent Librarians’ in Cuba. This controversy also led to a ‘fact-finding ‘ tour by a joint ALA/IFLA group in May of 2001. Much has already been written about this issue, (2,3) and while it is not the focus of this report, it is an important background note for those who may wonder why some of us are so interested in this small island nation to our south. Many fine articles have also been written about libraries and the library profession in Cuba. (2,4)

While the tours led during 2000-2002 provided incredible experiences for all who participated in them, an opportunity to engage with our library colleagues on a deeper level presented itself in 2001. When the INFO 2002 conference was announced, the organizers extended a warm invitation for North American librarians to submit papers for consideration. Following this conference, several of us were invited back to participate in the 2nd ASCUBI (Cuban Library Association) Congress in 2003. I was fortunate enough to be able to participate in both of these conferences, and what follows is a brief report on each.

INFO 2002: Information, Knowledge, and Society: Challenges of a New Era

This conference was held from April 22-26th, 2002 at the very impressive Palacio de Convenciones, the Havana International Conference Center. The Center was shared that week with an FAO meeting so the atmosphere was filled with international exchange. Co-incidentally, this was also a week of particularly high tension between Cuba and Mexico, so a few of us loitering in the halls caught a glimpse of President Castro on his way in to give a press conference on that matter.

This was the 14th INFO conference, which is more or less a bi-annual conference (the prior one was held in 1999, then next is in 2004) that seeks to provide a weeklong international forum on ‘informatization’ – that is, the integration of technology, information science, information policy, and society. The organizing body of the conference is IDICT, the Institute for Scientific and Technological Information. The official languages were Spanish and English.

Approximately 450 delegates from 21 different countries participated. Thirty-one Americans (USA) attended, including an official ALA delegation that was led by John W. Berry (then president of ALA) and Mitch Freedman (incoming president at the time). The conference had many sponsors, including a few familiar to American conference goers (e.g. Ebsco (from Mexico), and SWETS Blackwell).

Cuba cannot afford the luxury of ‘fluff’, so other than the opening evening reception, filled with mojitos and salsa dancing during a tropical sunset on the beach (hosted by the international delegation), the conference itself was solidly packed with content for four full days, one half day, and two evenings. Besides the four keynote addresses and various workshops, posters, and ‘encounters’, there were close to 100 scholarly papers presented on wide-ranging topics, from marketing to meta-data.

Some of the highlights for this participant were hearing Jesus Rivero from the DINTEL Foundation in Spain, which is a private non-profit foundation that serves as a gateway to the technologies of information and communication; a presentation from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) on their program of electronic access to journals and databases, and an ‘encounter’ of library associations from different countries where part of the focus was on collaborations and mergers of various associations within countries. Cuba has two associations – SOCIT (Society of Cuban Information Professionals and Technologists), the larger of the two, which in some ways resembles ASIS, and ASCUBI (Cuban Librarian Association), the smaller one, which in some ways resembles ALA. There was great interest in hearing about the recent merger of library associations in the U.K., as told by Bernard Naylor, the past president of the Library Association, now part of CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals).

Sessions were impressive not only in content but in the efficiency with which they were run and the total absence of any technology glitches. Superb translation services were provided for most sessions – about 60% simultaneous and the rest sequential. There was also an amply sized cyber-café available to attendees.

The next INFO conference is to be held from April 12th-16th, 2004 in the same venue. The conference theme is “ Multidisciplinary, social, and technological integration on a human scale: questions and answers”. More information is available at www.congreso-info.cu.

Second ASCUBI National Congress

This conference, held also in Havana, from February 5th - 8th, 2003, was an entirely different sort of meeting. It was co-located at the National Library (Biblioteca Nacional José Martí) and at the San Carlos de La Cabaña Fort, an 18th-century Spanish colonial fort overlooking Havana Bay, where the 12th International Book Fair was being held.

The Cuban Association of Librarians, ASCUBI, is a fairly young association of about 1000 members. It was formed in 1995 and held its first congress in 1996. The founding president was Marta Terry González, formerly the Director of the National Library and currently the Director of the Cuban Institute of the Book. Marta is well known to everyone who has participated in any of the North American library tours of Cuba. From 1997 through 2002, no congresses were held, though there were regular meetings of chapter executives. This meeting marked only their 2nd national conference, and because of this, there was much internal business to take care of and plenty of internal politics to sort out. In spite of this, the organizers were interested in having a few of their American colleagues join them, both to share with us the inside view of the development of their organization, as well as to invite us to give papers on topics such as collection development, public services, and Internet instruction.

Other than the six Americans, this meeting was attended by 115 delegates from most, if not all, of Cuba's fourteen provinces. Most of the delegates were from the provincial and public libraries, with a handful of academic librarians in attendance as well. Cuba is not a large country, so it felt similar to a meeting of one of our smaller state organizations.

The first day was pretty well filled with opening remarks by President Terry, followed by remarks by the Minister of Culture and by Eliades Acosta Matos, the current Director of the National Library. Mr. Acosta spoke about the role of the library in the formation of national identity. In the evening, there was a cocktail party given at the Public Library (Ruben Martinez Villena), in old Havana where awards were given to a few people who had had a powerful impact on Cuban librarianship. Among the awardees, was Dr. Emilio Setién Quesada who is Cuba's foremost information theorist. Because a social event in Cuba is never without music, we also gathered around librarian and pianista extraordinaire, Pedro Emilio Lima.

The second day was spent at the International Book Fair, where a workshop for librarians and editors was held, and where delegates were free to explore the fair. The International Book Fair is quite a phenomenon. It runs for 11 days in Havana, and virtually the entire city attends, with many people making multiple trips. There are book stalls from the various Cuban publishing houses, as well as from many other countries. One entire pavilion is dedicated to the honored country or region of the fair – this year being the Andean Community (Bolivia, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela). There is one pavilion filled with children's books and children excitedly reading everywhere. Lectures and discussions led by the authors are given in halls introducing and discussing many of the featured books of the fair. While one of my Cuban writer friends commented to me that he felt the fair was overly political this year (mostly due to a very

hot Venezuelan book and books about the Miami 5), there seemed to be plenty of literature for people with all tastes, ranging from Cuban colonial poetry to Spiderman and Simpson's comic books from Mexico. For more on the book fair, see Silberman and Dunlap(5).

The conference continued for a third day with mostly contributed papers and internal association business. The highlight from these sessions, from my perspective, was a presentation by Msc. Zoia Rivera on the 'Contribution of the Lyceum Lawn Tennis Club to the Development of Cuban Library Science'. In summary, the LLTC was a social/cultural club for the wives of the Cuban aristocracy that existed and was active from the late 1920's through the 1950's. One of their primary activities was founding public libraries, sponsoring literary programs, and teaching librarians. The presentation was of interest, because, generally, when one visits Cuba, we hear about the great accomplishments since the Revolution in 1959, which are indeed impressive, but this presentation, and Msc. Rivera's extensive research fills a gap in awareness of the history of the Cuban information environment.

By then end of the conference, new leadership had been elected. The new President of ASCUBI is Margarita Bellas, Director of Library Services at the 'Mas Luz' Public Library in Boyeros (Havana province). The three vice-presidents are Felicia Perez, Miguel Viciado, and Martha Wong. The three secretaries are Dr. Emilio Setien, Sara Moreno, and Noris Somano. While this was an emotional moment for the departing President, it was clear that she is held in great esteem by all of her colleagues and is appreciated for all that she has done to bring the association to this point. It was clear that she will be serving as an 'elder stateswoman' to the new leadership.

Meanwhile, the new leaders are riding the momentum generated at the conference, and have just launched their first 18 page issue, dated March 2003, of a new bulletin called 'ASCUBI Informa'. This publication will serve as a communication vehicle for the organization, containing announcements, news, discussion, and editorials.

At the end of March, 2003, the Office of Foreign Assets Control has announced its intention to change the guidelines for educational travel to Cuba.(6) The legal travel that many enjoyed on these recent tours may or may not be legal in the near future. Anyone who has an interest in visiting Cuba needs to stay aware of the current situation. Current travel guidelines can be found through the OFAC website. (7)

References and Notes

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