

# **Creating a Library System that Serves the Needs of Rural Communities in Africa South of the Sahara**

by

Sylvia A. Nyana, M.L.S.  
Social Sciences Librarian, The Pennsylvania State University  
E-mail: san17@psu.edu

## **Abstract**

Colonial powers introduced libraries to Africa and they were developed according to the Western model of libraries and librarianship where knowledge and culture are primarily transmitted through print media, and now increasingly through electronic means. Against the backdrop of oral tradition which predominates in African culture, this approach leaves out the vast majority of the rural population who are generally unable to read and write and unaccustomed to print and have limited or no access to electronic media. Fifty years after the end of colonialism in Africa, the transmission of knowledge and culture in rural communities continues to be predominantly oral (word of mouth, proverbs, etc.) however, African librarians have failed to address this in their collections and services. This paper reflects on some of the problems facing African libraries in the provision of information and services to rural communities regarding: inappropriate collections and services, lack of surveys/ analyses of information needs of rural communities, high-levels of illiteracy, disregard for oral tradition in the provision of services, lack of funding and cooperation between related agencies, and inappropriate training of African librarians, to name a few. Therefore, this paper suggests a library system that is sustainable and compatible with the oral tradition, and thus explore the following questions: (1) is the provision of information in print relevant to rural populations where information and knowledge are communicated orally; (2) are library collections and services patterned after Western culture and information needs relevant to rural communities in Africa, and (3) how can African librarians be better trained to meet the information needs of rural communities?

## Introduction

Newke (1995) defines libraries as “repositories of knowledge or storehouses of written records of civilizations in various forms of the information package...the elements of a library are books...libraries play informational, recreational, research, cultural, educational ...” roles (46). Amadi (1981) elaborates “libraries in Europe and America exist to meet the cultural and information needs of their communities, but African libraries are both British and American.” In most parts of Africa, this model is inappropriate since African libraries are products of the Western model of librarianship, and therefore cannot play the role of information providers or storehouses of African cultures and traditions rooted in the oral tradition.

Of the 1,129 libraries in Africa, 797 are public libraries, 266 are in higher educational institutions, 51 are in schools, and 15 are national libraries (IFLA 2003). African governments do not have the luxury of building different types of libraries in each community, resulting in most rural communities having little or no access to library resources and services. Moreover, even if rural communities have physical access to some library services such as reading programs, it is likely that they cannot make full use of the materials available due to high rates of illiteracy. According to a recent study, the current adult literacy rate in Africa south of the Sahara stands at 71 percent for males and 53.7 percent for females (UNESCO 2007). In many countries, such as Benin, for example, the literacy rate is much lower, 47.9 percent for males and 23.3 percent for females (CIA World Factbook 2007).

One of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) mission is to empower people through the free flow of ideas by word and image, and by access to information and knowledge (UNESCO Homepage). Access to relevant information is crucial to the economic, political, and social well-being of any community. Unlike Europe or North America, access to information in Africa, where it exists, is concentrated largely in the urban areas. Sturges and Neill (1998) state that information is very important in rural development, and should be tailored to reflect the culture and needs of a particular group or community. In the South African context, Wakelin and Simelane (1995) point to the importance of information provision in capacity building and empowering communities, and argue that lack of access to information is one of the structural causes of poverty. Mazie and Ghelfi (1995) agree that information is critical for people, businesses, and communities in both urban and rural areas. However, they noted that rural areas are at a disadvantage because of their remoteness from urban areas, the centers of information flow, which makes it difficult for rural areas to access information and translates it into useful knowledge. (8)

## Literature Review

The idea of delivering library services to rural Africa is well-intentioned, but as it is based on a Western model, thus services do not meet the needs of African communities. Arguments about the state of libraries in Africa and calls for ways of improving existing libraries and their services are not new. However, recommendations and solutions suggested by library scholars so far have been based on the Western model, emphasizing literacy and books, ignoring the importance of the oral tradition in Africa. The UNESCO Seminar of 1954 on development of public libraries in Africa favored literacy and argued for the need for public libraries, stating “Throughout Africa people are being helped by mass education programmes to emerge from illiteracy and ignorance, and they need continued access to suitable publications, stimulations of their reading interests and expert reading guidance to sharpen their new skill into an effective instrument of self education” (14). Library scholars continue to share this view today regarding the Western model of librarianship.

Several library scholars acknowledge the importance of oral tradition to rural Africa and that information can be transmitted orally; however, literacy is still seen as the final goal. For example, Totemeyer (1994) acknowledges the problem of reliance on literacy as a precondition of obtaining information, but then adds “Appropriate information for personal and societal growth will make the illiterate perceptive to new ideas and create the urge and climate for acquiring literacy to learn even more” (417). Bertrand acknowledges the existence of oral culture, however, she recommends “...targeting the health workers in the field in order to develop a reading culture to gain knowledge, which in turn will benefit the communities...” (222). Mchombu and Cadbury (2006), while acknowledging problems with the existing models state:

In today’s global information society, non-literate people are at a permanent disadvantage – unsure of their rights, unable to fulfill their potential and unable to play a full part in society. They are disempowered. Literacy is a right and a capability that is fundamental to overcoming poverty. (5)

The low use of libraries in rural Africa can be attributed to the exclusive use of print as the transmission of information. Mchombu (1991) reported findings from several surveys in Botswana, Kenya, and Tanzania showing the overall percentage of library users below 7.5 percent. In Uganda, for example, there were only 158,407 registered public library users out of a population of 21 million compared to 34,900,000 registered users in United Kingdom (UNESCO 1999). Abdulla (1998) states the constant demands for information by farmers in rural areas remain unfulfilled because of illiteracy. Aboyade (1984) argues that national development and rural development are linked, and these rural populations are unable to read and write, thus need access to information.

Alemna (1995) reports studies done in Tanzania (1984), Nigeria (1981), and Kenya (1984) that found a common pattern of information needs in rural areas. These needs include information related to agricultural skills, marketing of produce, and basic health information (services traditionally not provided in Western libraries). Alemna added that fulfilling these needs does not necessarily require databases or advanced technologies.

## **Problems**

Sturges and Neill (1990) argue that existing African libraries are foreign and were developed without modification or consultation with African communities. Library scholars and researchers attribute the low use of libraries in Africa to high-levels of illiteracy, lack of awareness of information needs of rural communities, inappropriate collections and services, lack of surveys for specific needs of a particular community, lack of funding and cooperation between information related agencies, and lack of skilled librarians (Mostert 2001; Nawe 1993; Afolabi 1998; Stillwell 1991; Matare 1998; and Issak 2000). Therefore, African libraries have failed to provide collections and services that meet the needs of rural communities. Mwalimu Julius Nyerere (1922-1999), former President of Tanzania highlights problems and challenges facing post-colonial libraries in Africa. Nyerere (1975) in "Education in the least-developed countries" argues that:

So the first problem we have not solved is that of building sufficient self-confidence to refuse what we regard as the world's best (whatever that may mean), and to choose instead the most appropriate for our conditions. In education, industry, agriculture and commerce, we all too often prefer blind invitation to relevant initiative or rational adaptation (12).

Mchombu (1991) summarizes problems facing African librarianship:

Despite its early success, African librarianship was unable to live up to the expectation of the government backers, or the intended users. At this formative stage, there was belief that the information needs, and the information-seeking behavior of Africans was identical to those of library users in Europe and North America. It was also thought that the concept and philosophy of librarianship as practiced in the Anglo-American tradition with its organizational and bureaucratic structures, bibliographically-biased foundation, and middle class outlook could all be imported without modifications to Africa. It was left to the African public to adapt themselves as best they could to this alien institution, for the institution was sacrosanct. (30)

Chijioke (1989) states, “African people themselves have been to blame for many of the misconceptions since they expected to receive the same model as their European counterparts. In their view, anything less would have been inferior.” Mchombu (1991) cites a statement by Kenneth Kaunda, the former President of Zambia, where he warned Zambians that they were heading for intellectual bankruptcy because of the poor state of the nation’s bookshops and the President called the absence of good books a “national tragedy” (28).

The problem of inappropriate collections has also been exacerbated by book donations from the West, whose content is foreign and does not reflect the culture or address the needs of rural African communities. For example, the agricultural information in the west does not necessarily apply to African conditions and food preservation texts are not directly applicable in rural Africa due to technology and infrastructure. Mostert reports a study by Alemna (in Stillwell 1991) which found that libraries in Ghana imported ninety percent of their materials from Britain and United States, a trend that is common in the rest of Africa south of the Sahara. Another problem is Africa’s reliance on funding from the West. If donations from the West were to cease, the existence of many African libraries would be in question. Furthermore, library funding is not a priority for African governments. For example, Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda receives 100 percent of its budget from donors (Dent and Yannotta 2005).

There has been a failure to recognize the importance of oral culture, which has been used to transmit information and knowledge in Africa from generation to generation. Much of the literature on libraries in Africa focuses on changing oral culture to written culture (UNESCO 1954; Amadi 1981; Newke 1995). African libraries are still acquiring, organizing, and providing services based on printed materials, ignoring the oral tradition predominant in rural areas. Alemna (1996) notes that African libraries are trying to replace oral culture with reading culture, rather than focusing on providing relevant skills and information necessary for rural communities.

Library scholars and researchers have documented the lack of community surveys and consultations by African librarians and donors regarding information needs of the rural population (Amadi 1981, Sturges and Neill 1990). Alemna (1995) argues that the primary concerns of African librarians and donors alike are literacy and the number of books in libraries. He continued that African needs and the way Africans learn are different from the West. Nyerere’s speech (1967) “Education for Self-Reliance” argues that “The fact pre-colonial Africa did not have ‘schools’--except for short periods of initiation in some tribes—did not mean that the children were not educated. They learned by living and doing. In the homes and on the farms they were taught the skills of the society, and the behavior expected of its members...” (2)

The lack of skilled librarians, especially those with the knowledge and willingness to incorporate oral culture in the provision of services to rural communities, further limits the reach of library services in rural Africa. Other challenges facing African librarianship include few local publishing facilities and the wide range of African languages. According to Ikoja Odongo (2003), Uganda constitutionally recognizes 56 languages.

While library scholars have recorded that most African libraries are located in urban areas, they rarely mention the impact of this on African society. Essentially, the African library system caters to an exclusive group--the urban dwellers--creating a society where only city residents have full access to information, while the rest of the population is left out.

### **Alternative Library Models**

While the use of the Western model for libraries has been useful in urban areas with higher literacy rates and different information needs of the residents, rural libraries have not benefitted from this model. With different information needs, lower literacy rates, and an oral tradition, the model has failed. Due to the failure of Western model of libraries/librarianship to provide relevant services to rural communities, several African countries have embarked on community libraries and information centers as alternative provisions of services to rural communities in Africa. For example, the main goals of the Katengesa Center in Uganda, Chiwamba Community Information Centre in Malawi, and Illubabor Community Library and Information Centers Network in Ethiopia are to empower communities through literacy and functional education (Mchombu and Cadbury 2006). Although there are some documented successes, many of these community centers still reinforce literacy and rely heavily on sustained foreign donations. Rosenberg (1993) gives a grim picture of the life cycle of rural African libraries:

Originating from the initiative of a group from the community or an aid agency, their birth is followed by a year or two of rapid growth and a good deal of local publicity and attention. This is followed by a period of slow decline, accompanied by theft, the departures of initiators, loss of interest among staff and users—the library still exists but signs of life are barely discernible. Sometimes this period continues indefinitely, but often a final stage is reached when all remaining books are removed, stolen, or damaged beyond repair and the premises and staff are allocated to another activity. (30)

There are alternative models already in Ghana and Mali that closely match the needs of rural communities because they bring in experts and professionals from different fields to provide information to oral consumers in a format that is meaningful to them.

Paul Sturges (1997) describes Audiotheques rurales du Mali, a community centre project:

In nearly 150 villages, Committees for Oral Knowledge consisting of local dignitaries, traditional healers, extension workers and volunteer audio librarians, administer a service. The national structure is intended both to disseminate information on hygiene, health, farming, environmental protection and other practical matters, and give wider access to traditional knowledge in the forms of local history, stories, songs, medical and agricultural knowledge. (192)

Yeboah (2000) describes the Danfa project in Ghana as:

Thus centres of research into traditional medicine would also operate as information centres where indigenous and exotic knowledge systems would be linked to create new knowledge. These information professionals would work with modern medical research specialists, herbal pharmacists, medicine men, community elders and the common people, to exchange ideas and identify, extract and develop useful health care knowledge. (207)

Amadi's concept of the "barefoot librarian" could be another solution to addressing rural information needs. In this model, a professional with training or knowledge of, the oral tradition, and competent in the use of Western technology to enhance oral tradition, would be able to serve both oral and print consumers (Onwubiko 1996). However, the cost of audio-visual equipment and maintenance is not sustainable for rural communities where there are other pressing needs. African librarians have to look for a cheaper local alternative that is sustainable. Oral transmission is cheap and could take the forms of group discussions, person to person communication, and other forms of learning through drama, poetry, and song.

## **Suggestions**

Future library initiatives should have flexible programs to meet the unique needs of rural African communities. The following suggestions are not absolute; they can be modified to meet the needs of a particular community.

### *1) Incorporating oral tradition in library services*

Incorporating oral tradition in the transmission of information in rural areas is necessary, since the majority of the population is unable to read or write and cannot use print-based materials. Alemna (1995) suggests repackaging information to meet the oral culture of the African communities. Ideally, the library system should incorporate both oral and print-based modes of information transmission. Issak (2000) recommends that African librarians should think outside the Western model of librarianship when designing services for rural communities. Consideration should be given to proper format of delivery and sustainable technology. For example, print materials should be available for those who can read and these same materials should be translated orally for those who cannot read. Oral transmission can take the form of group discussions, workshops, person-to-person interaction, storytelling, as well as poetry and drama. This paper is not discounting the importance of print; rather, it is suggesting that the provision of information in print-form only is counterproductive to the information needs of rural populations.

### *2) Borrow relevant technologies*

African libraries can borrow technology from the West that enhances oral tradition. Wise (1985) challenged African libraries/librarians to stop thinking of the library as a building with books, and to try to borrow from the reading culture what is relevant for oral culture. Adimorah (1993) advocates borrowing what is good in Western library practice and integrate it with what is relevant to local culture. Meeting the needs of rural communities does not require advanced technology. For example, technologies like radio and audio-visual equipment can be used to produce materials that are sustainable and compatible with the oral tradition. Such materials could be used to provide relevant information on agriculture or aquaculture, and related information on marketing and other skills relevant to rural communities where farming or fishing is a way of life.

### *3) Collaboration between information agencies*

Collaboration between information agencies, local and national governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Western donors are cost effective and sustainable. With few resources and non-existent library budgets, many African countries do not have the luxury of building academic, public, or community libraries in every rural community. A solution is to provide opportunities to rural communities to access relevant information and skills from existing libraries that are located nearby, whether public, school, or academic libraries. There is no need for new buildings in rural areas because there are existing schools, churches, and government buildings that can be used for rural meetings, workshops, or trainings. Existing libraries can set goals that take into account the needs of rural populations. Also, librarians can tap into the knowledge base of local and national experts to provide monthly workshops on relevant information and skills that impact a particular community.

#### *4) Retraining of African librarians*

There is urgent need to train and educate librarians in the provision of information to rural communities. A librarian knowledgeable in print and oral culture can make informed decisions about the needs of rural communities and effective formats to use. Incorporating oral tradition in library school curricula exposes new librarians to alternative methods in the provision of library services. The library science curriculum should include storytelling and technologies like audio-visuals that enhance oral tradition. African librarians can collaborate with or recruit volunteers from communities (elders, community leaders and/or government officials) to organize workshops, and meetings, where relevant information can be passed orally. There are no shortages of teachers and mentors in oral tradition.

#### *5) Marketing of library services*

African librarians need to address the problem of low use of library services. The role of libraries has not always been explained to rural communities in Africa. Existing African libraries operate in isolation and there is a need to market library services to rural communities through the media and in print for those who can read, or on radio and/or television programs. Marketing libraries could also be done through word of mouth, at meetings, or in workshops. The problem of low use will continue until rural communities realize the connection between libraries and community development, and that libraries are not just for the elites.

#### *6) Meeting the needs of diverse rural communities*

The lack of materials in local languages hampers the oral transmission of information that is available only in Western languages. Print is now part of African culture, so there is a need to invest in local publishing to serve the diverse needs of rural populations both able to read and write, and those unable to read and write. To achieve this, donors and NGOs should focus on helping African countries to produce materials in the local languages for those who can read; and activities based on the oral tradition can be designed for those who are unable to read and write.

#### *7) Preservation of oral tradition*

African libraries' role in the preservation of culture and tradition is critical with the advance of technology. Documentation of oral literature and local technology (farming, weaving, brewing, pottery, etc.) is necessary because most of the knowledge and skills are being lost through the death of traditional leaders, elders, and griots (West Africa). This can be achieved through the collaboration of existing African national libraries and museums, and national governments.

## **Conclusion**

Many library scholars attribute the low use of libraries in Africa to the existing model of libraries and librarianship that is based on the Western system, and recommend new models grounded in the oral tradition that address the needs of a largely print-unable to read and write population. Although external problems exist, African librarians must acknowledge that there are also problems within; failure to see the link between libraries and development has resulted in low library use. Both extreme positions that good things can only come from the West, and the alternative African-centric view that nothing from the West is good for Africa are roadblocks to development. What rural communities need are relevant information in the most appropriate format. Print is now part of the African culture, and African libraries and librarians must adapt it to fit the information needs of rural communities. A cultural change in library school education and library philosophy is necessary to create an efficient and appropriate library system.

Nawe (1993) captures the ideal library model:

... adaptation is required in the creation of information structures and methodologies that would encompass Africa's traditional knowledge resources and modern knowledge resources. Information management and marketing strategies: acquisition, dissemination and use of relevant information; modification of information seeking behavior; and most of all, stopping the inertia of perceiving and expressing problems in terms of external factors, are factors that need immediate attention..." (8)

## References

- Aboyade, B. O. (1984). Communications potential for non-literates: An experiment in providing information in a rural setting. *Libri*, 34(3), 243-262.
- Adimorah, E. N. O. (1993). Rural community information systems and culture in Africa. *Resource Sharing and Information Networks*, 8(2), 91-116.
- Abdulla, A. D. (1998). The role of libraries in Somalia's reformation. *Libri*, 48(1), 58-66.
- Afolabi, M. (1998). Articles on libraries and librarianship in Nigerian newspapers. *Libri*, 48(2), 96-101.
- Alemna, A. A. (1995). Community Libraries: An alternative to public libraries in Africa. *Library Review*, 44(7), 40-44.
- Alemna, A.A. (1996). *Issues in African Librarianship*. Accra: Type Co.
- Amadi, A. O. (1981). *African libraries: Western tradition and colonial brainwashing*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.
- The CIA World Factbook*. (2008). Retrieved April, 15, 2009, from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>
- Chijioke, M. E. (1989). Public library services as information networks: Nigeria in the twenty-first century. *Journal of Librarianship*, 21(3), 174-185.
- Dent, Valeda and Yannotta, Lauren. (2005). A rural community library in Africa: A study of its use and users. *Libri*, 55, 39-55.
- Durrani, S. (1987). Agricultural information services in Kenya and third world needs. *Journal of Librarianship*, 19(2), 108-121.
- Education in the least-developed countries. *Prospects Quarterly Review of Education*, 5(1), 1975. Retrieved from UNESCO <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0001/000137/013787eo.pdf>.

- Global library statistics 1990 – 2000*. Retrieved April, 15, 2009, from [http://www.ifla.org/III/wsis/wsis-stats4pub\\_v.pdf](http://www.ifla.org/III/wsis/wsis-stats4pub_v.pdf).
- Ikoja-Odongo, J. R. (2004). Public library politics: The Ugandan perspective. *Information Development*, 20(3), 161-181.
- International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). (2003). *DRAFT Global Library Statistics*. Retrieved April, 30 [http://archive.ifla.org/III/wsis/wsis-stats4pub\\_v.pdf](http://archive.ifla.org/III/wsis/wsis-stats4pub_v.pdf).
- Issak, A. (2000). *Public libraries in Africa: A report and annotated bibliography*. Oxford: International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications.
- Kitengesa community library, Uganda*. Retrieved April, 15, 2009, from <http://www.kitengesalibrary.org/>.
- Matare, Elizabeth (1998). Libraries and cultural priorities in Africa. *IFLA Journal*, 24(1).
- Mazie, S.M. and Ghelfi, L.M. (1995). Challenges of the rural environment in a global economy. *Library Trends*, 44(1), 7-20.
- Mchombu, K. J. (1991). Which way African librarianship? *IFLA Journal*, 17(1), 26-38.
- Mchombu, Kingo and Cadbury, Nicola (2006). Libraries, literacy and poverty reduction: A key to African development. Retrieved from [http://www.bookaid.org/resources/downloads/Libraries\\_Literacy\\_Poverty\\_Reduction.pdf](http://www.bookaid.org/resources/downloads/Libraries_Literacy_Poverty_Reduction.pdf).
- Mostert, B. J. (2001). African public library systems: A literature survey. *Library and Information Science Research*, 11(1) Retrieved from <http://libres.curtin.edu.au/libres11n1/mostert.htm>.
- Nawe, J. (1993). The realities of adaptation of western librarianship to African situation. *Journal of Libraries, Archives and Information Science*, 2(1), 1-9.
- Newke, M. C. (1995). Libraries and related activities as instrumentalities of education for rural development in Nigeria. *Rural Libraries*, 15(2), 45-54.
- Nyerere, J. K. (1967). *Education for self-reliance*. Dar es Salaam: Printed by Govt. Printer.
- Nyerere, J. M. (1975). Education for self-reliance. in "education in the least-developed countries". *Prospects Quarterly Review of Education*, 5(1), 12. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0001/000137/013787eo.pdf>.

- Onwubiko, C. P. C. (1996). The practice of Amadi's "barefoot librarianship" in African public libraries: Constraints and prospects. *Library Review*, 45(4), 39.
- Rosenberg, D. (1993). Rural community resource centres: A sustainable option for Africa. *Information Development*, 9(1/2), 29-35.
- Stillwell, C. (1991). Community libraries: A viable alternative to the public library. *Progressive Librarian*, 4, 17-27.
- Sturges, P. and Neill, R. (1998). *The quiet struggle: Information and libraries for the people of Africa* (2nd ed.). London: Mansell.
- Sturges, Paul and Neill Richard. (1990). *The quiet struggle: Libraries and information for Africa*. London ; New York: Mansell.
- Totemeyer, Andree-Jeanne (1994). Speaking from a book: The transfer of De-recorded information to the information starved. *IFLA Journal*, 20 (4).
- UNESCO institute for statistics, data centre. (September 2007). Retrieved April, 15, 2009, from <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/tableviewer/document.aspx?ReportId=143>.
- UNESCO (1999). *Registered users for public libraries*. Retrieved April, 28, 2009, from <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=207>.
- UNESCO (2005-2007). *Regional literacy statistics (table)*. Retrieved April, 28, 2009, from <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=201>.
- UNESCO (1954). *Development of public libraries in Africa : The Ibadan seminar*. Paris: UNESCO.
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Retrieved April, 30, 2009, from [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=1657&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=1657&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).
- Wakelin, F. and Simelane, S. (1995). The regional consultative forum on rural development and information. *Innovation*, 11, 40-43. Retrieved from <http://www.innovation.ukzn.ac.za/Innovation/InnovationPdfs/No11pp40-43Wakelin&Simelane.pdf>.

Wise, M. (1985). *Aspects of African librarianship: A collection of writings*. London; New York: Mansell.

Yeboah, T. (2000). Improving the provision of traditional health knowledge for rural communities in Ghana. *Health Libraries Review*, 17(4), 203-208.