Preface

This book is designed to provide an overview of the rural library in Africa and the impacts and challenges associated with the services these libraries provide to their communities. Readers will probably find that this book has a unique tone – it is written as a scholarly treatment of the subject and includes rigorous research, but it is also has a humanitarian framework and highlights those people living in rural areas whose lives have been affected by these libraries. The target audience for the book is broadly drawn – scholars, teachers, librarians, and humanitarians who are interested in literacy, economic development, and access to information in the developing world will find it useful. This is especially true for educators and librarians who live in Africa. Aid workers who spend time in developing areas, NGO employees, and volunteers may also learn quite a bit about the potential uses of these libraries in providing a variety of services for their communities. The way in which these libraries continue to develop and change their surrounding communities is interesting from a historical, social, economic, psychological, and cultural perspective; thus, we also believe that historians, economists, psychologists, and sociologists with an interest in Africa will enjoy the book. In fact, the collaboration of co-authors Dr. Goodman (a psychologist), Dr. Kevane (an economist), and Dr. Dent (a librarian) demonstrate this cross-disciplinary interest.

On the surface, this book provides details and examples of a library model for providing information services in rural areas. Public libraries in Africa have struggled to meet the needs of people in rural areas. It is important to understand that globally, public libraries do not share the same popularity and support that we are accustomed to in the United States. Many are based on a traditional Western (and often, colonial) model and are criticized for being out of touch with their users and not responsive to user needs. As a result of this and other factors (such as libraries simply not being present in many rural areas), library services are not used by the majority of the rural population. Given this fact, this book operates from the foundation that there are models that are better suited to serve those living in rural, developing areas of Africa, namely the rural community or village library. These libraries are established by and for the local population. Community leaders, schools, and churches may be involved, and the library is open to members of the community. In addition, the information and reading needs of the population are recognized and utilized in developing the collection and services of the library. How can others benefit from learning about the rural libraries that are having a positive impact on their rural communities? Can these successes be replicated? Although no one model would be able to meet the needs of all, the rural village library can in many cases be a starting point.
The goals of this book are several. First, to provide an overview of the rural village library concept—its history, strengths, challenges, implementation, and scalability—by providing a historical and present-day context for library services in rural Africa. Second, to highlight the ways in which several rural libraries and related organizations on the continent of Africa are making a difference by highlighting their impact in areas such as development of a reading culture, early literacy and reading skill development, local economic impact, and scholastic achievement. Third, to provide information on how certain organizations are working to build more of these rural village libraries. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the authors aim to inspire readers to value their own fortunes—having limitless resources at their fingertips—and perhaps inspire someone to become involved in working with the rural village library movement wherever and however they can.

This book begins with a visit to a small community library in rural Uganda. About an hour from the equator in the Western part of Central Uganda along a quiet dirt road sits a brick building with a beautiful mural painted on the outside. Children and adults enter and leave the building, many with books in their arms. There is a collection of shoes left at the front door and inside, an array of tables filled with books, a soft breeze, and in the distant background, the bleeting of a lone lamb. At one of the tables, a very young child is sitting with an older student, looking at a book with pictures of a cow on the page. “Ente” the child says. “That’s right. You can also say cow. Ente – cow.” “Cow,” the child says and smiles broadly. Underneath the table, the child’s bare feet swing with contentment. Local women come into the library to prepare for their Women’s Group meeting, which has been meeting in the library for more than 8 years (many of the Women’s Group members actually learned to read in the library); tonight they will discuss pooling the little money they have made by farming to buy school materials for a few primary school children who have been orphaned and have no family or support. Along the walls of the library are makeshift bookshelves with books arranged by type – Traditional Stories, Reference Books, Modern Stories, Health Books. The books are labeled and easy to find. The air itself is lyrical, with soft conversations in Luganda and a few in English filling the air.

WELCOME TO THE KITENGESA COMMUNITY LIBRARY

In 1999, Emmanuel Mawanda, the headmaster of a local secondary school in Kitengesa1, in Uganda, Africa, began a collaboration with Dr. Kate Parry, an English professor from Hunter College in New York City, who was also a part-time resident of the area. The shared interest revolved around finding ways to provide students and people in the village with reading materials. A volunteer had begun to lend reading material to students of the school on a regular basis out of a small box of 161 books. Mawanda and Parry asked students to provide some feedback on what they learned from or enjoyed about what they had just read. As a result of this initial interaction with readers in the village, in 2002, a one-room library was built on the grounds of the Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School, funded with a grant from the United Nations One Percent for Development Fund. During the summers of 2004 and 2005, at the request of Dr. Parry (who was a faculty member at the college where I worked at the time as a librarian), I had the opportunity to travel to rural Uganda, along with Lauren Yannotta, another librarian, to conduct a user study at the Kitengesa Community Library. The library was a small, one-room library in a remote area referred to as Kitengesa. The area had no running water, no electricity, and a population
devastated by poverty, AIDS, and illiteracy. We worked for an entire summer evaluating the library’s patterns of use, interviewing library users, reviewing handwritten circulation statistics, and evaluating the collection. We talked to the librarians, library users, students, teachers, and community members to learn more about the library and its place in their village. The result of our work, some of which will be presented in this book, was compelling to say the least. However, it was the impression left upon us by the people that we met that had a lasting impact. Later, when I met my husband, Geoff Goodman, in 2006, one of the first things I told him about was my research in Uganda. He was intrigued, especially by the potential impact of this library on the very young. We thought maybe one day we might work together on this project.

In 2007, I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Michael Kevane, a colleague of Dr. Parry’s, who had been working since the early 2000s on rural village library development in West Africa. I was fortunate enough to visit some of these libraries and my experience was similar to that I had had in Uganda — these libraries were transforming lives.

Many years on, the work and the rural library “movement” continues. Dr. Kate Parry along with colleagues in Uganda has since founded the Uganda Community Libraries Association (UgCLA), which now has more than 100 member libraries. The Friends of African Village Libraries (FAVL), founded by Dr. Michael Kevane, continues to develop and support rural village libraries in West Africa. The seventeen libraries supported by FAVL in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Tanzania, and Uganda now offer an expansive set of literacy and reading programs supported by a growing cadre of volunteers and framed by ongoing research on the libraries’ impact.

During this time, the efforts to explore the impact of these libraries and their various programs have also expanded. Experts from the fields of Education, Economics, Clinical Psychology, Linguistics, Literacy, and Information Science are just a few of the researchers who have been involved in these explorations since the mid 2000s. It is clear that these efforts are now part of a multidisciplinary effort that is global in nature and important to the continued growth of the rural library movement. Geoff Goodman, Michael Kevane, and I decided to develop our own modest contributions to that literature into this book, and we were pleased that Kate Parry was also able to contribute a chapter.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK**

This book is divided into four distinct sections, each with specific goals. These goals are articulated at the beginning of each section. Section 1 focuses on the historical and cultural framework that influenced the establishment of many of these rural libraries. Section 2 and 3 explore several important research studies associated with rural community libraries in East Africa and West Africa. Section 4 ties it all together by presenting an overview of organizations currently working to advance the rural library movement and some considerations for those who might also be thinking about conducting research in similar settings.

The reader may find that the one topic conspicuously absent is a discussion about the impact of technology and these libraries. The areas where many of these libraries operate are without the infrastructure for electricity or running water, making the implementation of certain technologies difficult. The aim of the rural libraries in this book are therefore to provide access to the most basic activities and materials related to reading since reading is a technology-independent skill without an expiration date. Library
users who become immersed in reading and related activities will be able to port those skills to learning to use a computer, for instance, when the opportunity arises. There are a number of initiatives in developing areas to introduce instruments such as iPads and laptops to children and adults – sadly, without ongoing access to software upgrades, power, all the apps that these devices need to be useful, it can be difficult to extend the utility of these tools beyond a year or so. The book’s conclusion does provide a bit more insight into the future role of technology in these libraries.

In order to get the most out of this book, understanding the framework of library services and the origins of the rural community library in Africa is key. The highlights of section 1 include a detailed history of rural library service development on the continent of Africa, an overview of the characteristics of the rural village library as defined by B.J. Mostert, the role of literacy and reading with the rural library context, and lastly, a thorough review of prior research on a specific grouping of these libraries. The discussion of previous research is important, as it frames the research projects found in sections 2 and 3. When taken together, these chapters provide not only the operational details for these libraries but also highlight the cultural, social, and economic implications as well.

Chapter 1 provides a very brief overview of the history, development, and characteristics of rural library services in several African countries from both a historical and modern-day perspective. Against the backdrop of public library development during colonialism, the chapter highlights the fact that libraries existed in Africa well before Colonial rule, but later library service development did not adequately meet the needs of the majority of the continent’s population. As a result, an alternative way of meeting the information needs of the people began to take shape. This chapter introduces the concept of and rationale for the development of the rural village or community library in Africa and details some particular instances of these establishments.

The development and use of the rural village library does not happen in a vacuum, and these libraries and their users are impacted by a wide variety of factors including literacy, development of a reading culture, and various social and cultural elements. Chapter 2 provides an overview of these factors within the context of the rural village library.

Chapter 3 presents an overview of some of the prior research done on select rural village libraries in Uganda, Ghana, and Burkina Faso not presented elsewhere in this book. This review is meant to provide a context for the ways in which researchers have sought to document the development and impact of these libraries over time. This review is not meant to be exhaustive – there may certainly be more work on the rural village library in Africa than is presented here. However, the aim of this chapter is simply to provide an overview of the topics being explored by researchers within this framework.

The Kitengesa Community Library is at the very epicenter of this book. The library serves as host to scholars, volunteers, and educators from all over the world who immerse themselves in the cultural, social, and educational environment in order to understand how a reading culture develops over time. As demonstrated in chapter 3, there is a growing collection of research studies on the Kitengesa Community Library on a wide variety of topics. Section 2 presents a number of more quantitative studies of the functioning and impact of Kitengesa Community Library. The central theme remains the same, however – to explore the impact of this library across as many user groups as possible. Section 2 also serves to demonstrate how various types of data become meaningful when analyzed as part of a quantitative approach to exploring the library’s impact. The library’s materials and programs are prominently featured, as are the users themselves.
Chapter 4 addresses the question of what materials would be useful and enjoyable for the new readers emerging from Africa’s recently expanded education systems. The Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda is described, and the library’s records of which books were borrowed over 2004-5 are analyzed. According to various criteria, the most popular books were storybooks, especially those based on traditional African stories. Books about various aspects of social development were less popular but were nonetheless borrowed and presumably read. The study has limitations, but it provides an indication of what kinds of material are appropriate for community libraries in rural Africa.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of research exploring the impact of the rural village library and other factors on secondary school students, a group of users that have been identified as a critical user group with a particular set of needs. Students in general are typically heavy users of these rural libraries, and use of the libraries by students take place within the context of complicated social, cultural, and environmental constructs, such as gender, socioeconomic status, reading habits, chronic poverty, and low literacy rates. These and other demographic factors are presented in chapter 1. Understanding the importance of these libraries to students is critical in light of the fact that schools in rural areas in Africa have little if any access to library or other reading materials and suffer from profound textbook shortages. Two groups of students—one with access to a rural village library and one without—served as the target population in a study of five factors related to students’ academic achievement (as measured by Overall Grade Average or OGA). The factors that were examined included library access, reading frequency, the presence of printed materials in the home, and the recreational reading of specific printed materials in the home. Taken together, the results provide some sense of the complexities involved in enhancing student outcomes in rural areas. The findings of this study may serve to highlight challenges associated with learning in rural environments as well as services that may help such as the rural village library.

Two cohorts of caregivers and preschool children residing in two rural Ugandan villages were recruited to identify the predictors of children’s learning readiness in chapter 6. Caregiver and child variables hypothetically associated with emergent literacy skills included caregiver’s medical health quality, caregiver depression, frequency of caregiver reading and storytelling to their children, and the child’s quality of attachment to the caregiver, which partially determines the attentional resources a child can commit to learning. The findings suggest that caregiver discomfort associated with poor medical health quality might allow caregivers to spend more time at home, where they can distract themselves with less physically demanding tasks such as reading and telling stories to their children. Their children’s more highly developed ability to inhibit their impulses might reflect their preoccupation with minimizing their caregivers’ discomfort. This ability might facilitate the development of emergent literacy skills in a culture that rewards paying strict attention to rote learning over creatively expressing oneself. If inhibitory control ideally prepares children for the hierarchical classroom environment that awaits them, it remains to be seen how children who participate in the STSA activity—which encourages self-expression through collectively acting out the children’s own stories—will perform in such a restrictive classroom setting.

How might rural village libraries impact local economic development? This question has not been studied in depth, but there is some anecdotal evidence from some of the rural libraries presented in this book that access to these libraries may provide an indirect way for users to discover the link between access to information and improvement in their way of life. Sometimes, this improvement may manifest itself as an improvement in economic status, no matter how slight. Other times, access to the library might result in improved literacy skills that in the long run may allow users to engage in income-generating
activities where reading or being able to write is necessary. The libraries themselves may also create local economic development programs that generate income that is then put back into the community and the library. These are explored in chapter 7.

Rural community libraries compete with other education programs for scarce resources of governments and donor communities. Education programs themselves compete in the wider field of programs to improve public health, the environment, to foster economic growth, and many other worthy goals. Increasingly, policy debates and donor decision-making revolve around evidence-based assessments of the likely impacts of programs. The best kind of evidence, for many purposes, consists of randomized control trials, where beneficiaries are randomly divided into groups that then received different programs. Often those benefitting from the program of interest are referred to the treatment group and others are referred to as the control group, following the language of medical trials.

Section 3 presents several impact evaluation studies undertaken to evaluate the impact of libraries and programs located in Burkina Faso and Ghana. As in section 2, the studies presented are quantitative in nature. The use a variety of methods, from purposefully selected matched villages for comparison to small-scale randomized control trials. The studies, taken together, suggest the community libraries and reading programs offered through libraries (such as summer reading camps) are likely reasonably cost-effective when compared with other education interventions.

Chapter 8 provides an overview of the operational costs and usage patterns of libraries in Burkina Faso that are supported by Friends of African Village Libraries. Data on totals of visits to libraries and book checkouts for lending libraries are summarized. Results of two studies that compare reading patterns in villages with libraries and those without suggest that libraries increase reading substantially. The chapter then presents a breakdown of expenses for operating modest one-room rural libraries, based on a decade’s worth of expense data maintained by FAVL. The usage figures and expense data permit a rough calculation of the cost of getting books read. The calculations suggest that for the young adult reading public in rural Burkina Faso, generating an extra book read each year costs somewhere between $1.50 and $4.00.

During the summer of 2008, all students in the 4th grade classroom (aged 11-13) in each primary school in five villages in southwestern Burkina Faso were randomly assigned and invited to participate in one of three different summer reading programs, including a summer reading camp. Chapter 9 presents an assessment of how much different summer reading programs offered to students at CM1 level (4th grade) improved reading capabilities. Effects of the various summer reading programs were measured by pre- and post-intervention written and oral reading assessments conducted on the school premises. The scores on the tests for the students who participated in the summer camps were higher than those of the students in discussion groups and those who received free books. There is, however, evidence that the project implementers did not randomly assign all students to the programs as intended. Controlling for initial test scores, therefore, the reading camps generated about 8% increase in scores, or an improvement in test scores of .5 standard deviations.

In August and September 2010, 200 Primary 5 students in northern Ghana attended 2-week summer reading camps hosted by 3 community libraries. The goal of the camps, presented in chapter 10, was to encourage reading among schoolchildren in a low-literacy environment. The camps appeared to be highly effective in improving reading abilities and habits. Reading scores on a written and oral test were considerably higher compared with a control group. Camps also had randomized programs and reading
incentives, varying from day to day and camp to camp. This variation permitted analysis of student reading patterns when offered different reading contexts. Contrary to a commonly held belief, when students had available books by African authors and on Africa-related themes (compared with European/American books), they did not read more books. Intrinsic motivation treatments, where students were encouraged to engage in a variety of exercises (writing reviews for friends, reading with parents) produced small positive effects. A simple extrinsic motivational device of a “reading tree,” where students posted “leaves” with the book title and their name upon completion of a book, had no statistically discernible effect. The absence of large effects of reading camp program components suggests the need for further research.

A small-scale project to induce more reading among 5th and 6th graders in rural Burkina Faso by providing them with solar-powered LED lamps indeed increased reading for students in villages without preexisting libraries, but did not affect reading capabilities. The research presented in chapter 11 aimed to establish the magnitude of effects after one year when 10-14 year-olds in rural African villages with small community libraries were given solar-powered lamps for night reading. The effects measured were reading habits (how much did students read?) and reading capabilities (how well could students read and comprehend what they read?). Once village effects were controlled, the lamps had statistically significant effects on reading habits for students in villages without preexisting libraries. The effect sizes were modest, ranging from .20 to .25. There were no effects on reading test scores. A cost-effectiveness metric to use for comparing with other studies of education interventions then is that expenditure of $1 per student on a solar-powered LED reading lamp distribution program generated about a 1% increase in reading, with no apparent effect on reading capabilities.

The final section of the book presents the reader with some considerations for future research efforts moving forward, especially in light of the fact that the rural community library movement continues to advance. For those interested in continuing this work, or those simply inspired to learn more about the rural community library in Africa, two topics may be relevant. First, which organizations are involved in advancing the rural community library in developing parts of the world, and second, what does doing research on these libraries really involve?

Mounting a research study in a rural sub-Saharan African village produces unique challenges not typically encountered in a cozy university laboratory. While the nature of all field research implies unpredictability and flexibility, rural village library researchers can avoid certain pitfalls that could sabotage their study. By disseminating the lessons the authors have learned, chapter 12 increases the likelihood that future researchers’ efforts at planning and executing their projects will bear fruit.

Chapter 13 presents an overview of nine organizations that strive to support the creation and support of rural libraries all over the world. These internationally based organizations typically work alongside local stakeholders to develop, build, and support these rural libraries. Some collect books, some help communities to build libraries and information centers on their own, some train community members to build these libraries, and others raise funds to support these efforts. Often times, these organizations do a little of all of the above. They are based in the United States, Europe, Asia, South America, and many other locations. There are some very well known international projects, but there are also smaller, lesser-known, highly effective organizations that have also made their mark.

A special type of joy comes from working with these libraries – it is the satisfaction of knowing that we are learning so much more than we could ever learn otherwise. Our lessons come from our local friends and colleagues, the library users, and the library staff in these villages. As the authors of this
book, the three of us—a librarian, a clinical psychologist, and an economist—continue to find our true joy in being learners, observers, and students involved in this important movement. It is not far-fetched to say that we have been transformed by our work with these libraries, the people, and our time spent in each of these countries.

We hope that you will enjoy reading this work, no matter where you are in the world, and that it is inspiring and eye-opening.

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ENDNOTES

1 Kitengesa is the name of the trading centre and of the parish where the trading centre is located. The village where the library and secondary school are located is actually called Lwannunda, as is the parish. However, for the purposes of this study, the area where the study took place will periodically be referred to as “the village” or simply as “Kitengesa.”