Chapter 4

Books for African Readers: Borrowing Patterns at Kitengesa Community Library, Masaka, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This chapter 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.

THE PROBLEM

In 1990, representatives of the international community met in Jomtien, Thailand, for the World Forum on Education for All. There they agreed that all children should be attending school by 2015, and they reaffirmed this agreement in 2000 at a follow-up conference in Dakar, Senegal. The Education for All initiative has encouraged a number of African governments to establish schemes for Universal Primary Education (UPE). Among them is the government of Uganda: in 1997 it made a commitment to provide four children in every family with free primary education, and since then it has expanded the scheme to include all children. It has also made a concerted effort to make more books available for use in primary schools (Uganda Government Ministry of Education and Sports, 2006), and it is rethinking the primary school curriculum to put more emphasis on basic literacy (Read & Enyutu, 2004).

A necessary outcome of this policy is that there will be—indeed, there already are—more literate Ugandans than ever be-
fore, and that they will include people from families and communities for whom literacy is a new phenomenon. The question addressed in this paper is what is this newly literate population to read? That question obviously concerns what material is available and how people can be given access to it, but my main focus here is on what is appropriate: in other words, what do Ugandans who come from typical peasant households actually want to read? It is a question that must be answered if authors, publishers, librarians, and educators are to respond helpfully and successfully to the unprecedented situation created by UPE.

**METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

The question, however, is not at all easy to answer. Little work has been done on the reading preferences of African populations, and such as has been done has depended on surveys conducted with school children (Rasana, 2005). Such surveys are valuable, but, as Rasana notes with regard to her own survey research, they are limited by their respondents’ lack of experience in reading books outside the school curriculum. People cannot express preferences for genres or authors that they have never encountered—and in the case of Rasana’s study, even when they had encountered particular authors and titles, the respondents had often forgotten their names so were unable to register an opinion of them. The problem is obviously exacerbated when the population of interest has less education and thus even less experience than had the South African secondary school students with whom Rasana worked. Such is the case with the newly literate populations of Uganda. Paper and pencil surveys are unlikely to produce interpretable information, and if the information is collected orally, the responses may be unduly influenced by informants’ perceptions of what the interviewers expect.

The research on which this paper is based employs a different technique. It can be described as action research since it is closely tied to a development project, namely, the establishment and progressive expansion of the Kitengesa Community Library (Parry, 2009). Kitengesa is the name of a small trading centre in Masaka District of the central region of Uganda, about a kilometer away from which is a secondary school called Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School (KCSS). The library was founded with the strong support of the school’s director, and its core membership consists of people associated with the school; but it also reaches out to the community at large, offering borrowing privileges to anyone living in the area on payment of a small annual fee of 2,000 Uganda shillings (the price, at the time of the library’s founding, of two bottles of beer or four bottles of soda). In 2005 the majority of members—393 out of 493—were or had recently been KCSS students, and as such they represented the more successful, or luckier, graduates of the recently expanded primary schools. The other members included 40 teachers, from neighboring primary schools as well as from KCSS, 21 students from other secondary schools, and an assortment of people not then involved in formal education, who described themselves variously as builders, businesspeople, farmers, and cooks.

The major purpose of the library is to promote reading and, through reading, social development, by providing material that such people will find interesting and relevant to their own concerns. A secondary purpose is to act as a center for research on literacy practices, including research on reading habits and preferences through the analysis of borrowing patterns. The findings of such analysis in the