

Chapter 58

Rural Library Services in African Countries: History, Development, and Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This chapter 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.

INTRODUCTION

It is a busy day in the Kitengesa Community Library located in rural Uganda along a dirt road surrounded by deep green foliage, fruit trees, and farm animals. The library is filled with young children, in the library to participate in a reading group being led by one of the library's young employees. There are women, older adults and visitors from the surrounding community. Laptops litter the tables, as volunteers from abroad teach interested learners how to use the machines. The head librarian sits with users, discussing what they are reading, sharing the library's newest titles, and talking about upcoming library programs.

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He tells them about the upcoming Health Reading and Computer Training Camp, where people from the community can come and learn how to take care of their health, their families' health, and prevent transmission of a number of illnesses. The librarian encourages especially the secondary school children to attend. Across the continent, in Burkina Faso at the Dohoun Library, children get ready to participate in the summer reading camps, where they will read materials specifically selected for their reading level. Some of the books have been created and published specifically for the reading camps. The camps are increasingly popular, and volunteers travel from abroad to help support the initiative. All of these activities are based solely on the needs of the community members, and based on observation, conversation and the expertise and experience of the local library staff. This is the rural village or community library model in operation.

The history of the rural village/community library in Africa is closely related to the need for a more organic service to meet the information needs of rural peoples. These small, often one-room libraries many times operate in areas without electricity, paved roads or running water, and they serve rural communities who have no other access to reading materials. Rural village or community libraries are found in South Africa (Mostert, 1998; Stilwell, 1989), Nigeria (Aboyade, 1984), Ghana (Alemna, 1995), Tanzania (Mchombu, 1984), Kenya (Durrani, 1985; Philip, 1980), Botswana, Mali, Zimbabwe (Sturges, 1994), Uganda (Parry, 2008; Parry, 2011), and Burkina Faso (Dent Goodman, 2008; Kevane & Sissao, 2008), among other countries. During the 1960s, the concept of "rural information centers" was being discussed by professionals and others in Africa who recognized the need for access to information by rural peoples, according to Rosenberg (1993, p. 29), and as a result, village and local reading room projects began to appear. For instance, Kenya's quest for independence during the 1960s was punctuated by an interest in the development of libraries in rural areas (Rosenberg, 1993). Eldoret Municipality was one of the first in the region to set up library services for local peoples (Rosenberg, 1993).

For the purposes of clarification, it is important to note that there are a host of terms found in the literature related to these rural establishments, and these libraries are sometimes interchangeably referred to as "rural village libraries," "rural libraries," "community libraries," "rural community libraries," and "village libraries." The distinction between these types of libraries and the public library are often based on governance and affiliation (local, national library service, NGO) and funding (local tax, local philanthropy, national government, international philanthropy, and so on). Generally, the terms "community library," "rural village library" and "rural library" will be used in this book. Also, although the context for this book is Africa, rural libraries can be found elsewhere in the world, but these terms may have slightly different meanings depending on the geographic region.

The development of these libraries grew out of the need to makeup for certain deficiencies of the traditional public or traditional library in Africa (these terms will be used interchangeably in this book). Scholars have argued that because of its origins, the concept of the traditional library has not been able to integrate or represent the information needs of the majority of Africa's population, which in and of itself is one of the richest and most diverse cultural mosaics in the world. There are a number of historical and present-day challenges that prevent traditional libraries from being accessible and useful to the majority of potential library users. Stilwell (1989, p. 264) writes "the needs of the colonized were subservient, if considered at all." At present, the public library in Africa suffers from profound underfunding and out-of-date collections (Stilwell, 1989). Furthermore, these libraries are often located in the urban centers, as is the case in Uganda, whereas 88 percent of the population live in rural areas (UNICEF, 2013). For these reasons, many of the public libraries are not used by a majority of the rural population.

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