

The development of libraries in Kenya

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This article analyses the growth of libraries in Kenya from the early colonial period to the present. It is noted that early libraries were associated with the development of the new colony. The use of libraries at that time was restricted to European and Asian communities. The information needs of the Africans were not considered until the late 1940s. With independence, libraries became accessible to all races. Although the post-independence era has witnessed marked development of all categories of libraries, growth in the 1990s appear to have been hampered by diminished funding from the Treasury.

Introduction

The history of libraries in Kenya is fairly recent. It can be traced back to the coming of western civilization. Until the coming of the Europeans in the second half of the 19th century, the only foreigners often seen along the Kenyan coast were the Arabs from the state of Oman. The Arabs were never known to have had an interest in setting up libraries there. In the second half of the 19th century some European missionaries and explorers started frequenting the East African region. The Church Missionary Society (CMS), for instance, established a mission station in Frere Town near Mombasa in 1887 for freed slaves. This station is said to have had a library specifically for missionary work (Rosenberg 1993).

The historical development of libraries in Kenya covers two periods: the colonial and post-independence eras.

The Colonial Era

The development of libraries in the colonial era can conveniently be discussed under the headings: special, public and academic libraries.

Special Libraries

The earliest special libraries were associated with activities pertaining to the development of the new colony (Otike 1987a: 275). Kenya was colonised by Great Britain in 1895. Right from the beginning of the colonial period, Kenya's economic potential was realised to be wholly agricultural. As a result, the early colonial government endeavoured to exploit this wealth by encouraging white settlers to come and exploit these potentialities. To assist farmers in this regard, the colonial government set up a Department of Agriculture. In an attempt to provide an ideal environment for developing the colony by the whites, law and order was strengthened with the introduction of the Colonial Police Force, and the establishment of the Law Courts to oversee the administration of justice.

Health also became an important issue in the development of the new colony. The administrators were keen to learn and find a cure to the kind of ailments they came across in Kenya. As a result, a number of research organisations were set up to address this problem. Although Kenya does not have extensive mining concerns, the early colonial administration could not overlook this. This led to the establishment of the Department of Mines and Geology.

All the above activities required information support. This issue was addressed through the establishment of special libraries. The result was the establishment of the High Court library in 1895 in Mombasa, which was the first seat of the High Court of Kenya to meet the needs of the bar and bench. The Department of Agriculture library was established in 1907. The Veterinary Research Laboratories library was also set up in 1907. The library of the National Public Health Laboratory

Services was established in 1911. The Attorney-General's library followed in 1914 to cater for the increasing needs of the legal staff at its Chambers. The library of the Kenya National Assembly was established in 1910 to serve members of the then Legislative Council (LegCo). In 1933 came the library of the Department of Mines and Geology to assist with mineral exploration. The library of the Kenya Broadcasting Service came into existence in 1940 to support the station's early activities.

In addition to the above libraries, other special libraries were also established. Among these were libraries owned by the National Museum in Nairobi in 1909; the Kenya Agriculture Research Institute (formerly, the East African Agricultural Research Organisation) in 1927; the Kenya National Archives in 1946; the Medical Training Centre library in 1962; and the Kenya Institute of Administration library in 1961.

Public Libraries

The early public libraries were associated with the information needs of the European and Asian communities. The needs of the Africans were not considered as it was felt that most Africans were basically illiterate, and could therefore not effectively make use of library services. It is also important to note here that the colonial period in Kenya was characterised by racial discrimination that extended into schools, social places, hospitals and libraries.

The earliest public library in Kenya was Sir Seif Bin Salim Public Library and Reading Room (Nganga, J.M. 1979: 130). This library was established by Asian philanthropists in 1903 to cater for the information needs of the Asian community. Asians, and in particular the Indians, were brought into Kenya in thousands to assist in the construction of the Kenya-Uganda Railway which started in Mombasa in 1898. A number of enlightened Indians were also invited by the colonial government to staff the civil and judicial services. In 1931 came the MacMillan Memorial library. The library was put up by Lady MacMillan in memory of her late husband, Sir Northrup MacMillan, who died in 1925. Sir Northrup was one of the earliest settlers in Kenya and ended up being a member of LegCo. The library services were available only to the European community.

In 1942, the Desai Memorial library was established by the Indian community in Nairobi in memory of Manilal Ambalal Desai, a member of the Legislative Council who died in 1926. The library, like the Sir Seif Bin Salim in Mombasa, was restricted to the Asian community.

Public library services for Africans did not start in the colony until 1948. The beginning of these services can be traced as far back as 1944. During the annual meeting of the Governors of the East African states comprising Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika (presently, Tanzania) in 1944, the Governors expressed their concern about the non-availability of reading materials for Africans in the region. Realising the importance of improving the reading ability of the Africans, the Governors appointed Elizabeth Huxley in 1945 to study the situation and report back. In 1946, Huxley presented a report - the Huxley Report. Among other things, the report recommended the establishment of the East African Literature Bureau (EALB) with a mandate to:

- encourage African authorship;
- publish materials in vernacular dialects; and
- establish lending libraries.

In 1947, the Huxley Report was accepted by the Governors. In 1948 the EALB was established. Charles Richard was appointed the Bureau's founding director, while George Annesley became the Bureau librarian. Annesley recommended the establishment of the main library in Nairobi, with branches in Kampala and Dar-es-Salaam. In discharging its services, the Bureau operated three services: lending, postal and book boxes.

The Bureau did a good job during its initial stages. However, with the increasing population, the sheer size of the region and the coming of independence, it was found that the Bureau library services would not be adequate for the purpose. As a result, the East African governments commissioned Sydney Hockey to re-examine the situation. Hockey recommended the establishment of independent national public library services. These recommendations were accepted by the East African governments. The result was the establishment of independent public library systems through Acts of Parliament. Tanganyika (Tanzania) Library Service was established in 1963

followed by Public Libraries Board in Uganda in 1964 and the Kenya National Library Services Board in 1965. The Kenya National Library Services Board Act empowered the Board to establish, promote, equip, manage, maintain and develop libraries in Kenya. Although the Kenya National Library Services Board Act was passed in 1965, it was not until 1967 that the Board started managing library services in the country.

Academic Libraries

The development of academic libraries during the colonial period was not as marked as that of special and public libraries. The reason is that very few academic institutions were established during this period. This phenomenon is not only confined to Kenya. It is a situation that was characteristic of many of the British African colonies. Only three institutions of higher learning existed in Kenya before independence. These were the Royal Technical College, Kenya Polytechnic and Egerton College. The Royal Technical College, now the University of Nairobi, was established in 1951 to provide technical training for all races in the country (Kimani 1982:25). In 1957 it was renamed the Royal College and started offering the degrees of the University of London. In 1961, it became a constituent college of the newly established University of East Africa, comprising University colleges of Nairobi, Makerere and Dar-es-Salaam.

The Kenya Polytechnic was established in Nairobi in 1961 to take over the functions of the former Royal Technical College as a centre for technical education. Egerton College was established in 1940 in Njoro near the agricultural heartland of Nakuru to train agricultural officers for Kenya and much of the East African region. The three institutions had well-equipped libraries staffed by British expatriates. It must be pointed out that until independence Kenya had only one qualified indigenous librarian, John Ndegwa, who qualified in 1957 with Library Association qualifications from Britain. He was among the few people trained specifically for the Bureau libraries.

Post Independence Era

Special Libraries

The country witnessed rapid development in the post-independence era. A number of research and development organisations were established immediately after independence to assist the new independent state to develop its natural, human, and capital resources. To assist these organisations to realise their objectives, a number of special libraries were established. Among these was the library of the Central Bank of Kenya established in 1967 to provide information support to the bank's staff. The International Centre for Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) was established in Nairobi in 1970. Its library came into existence in 1973 to support the centre's research scientists.

The library of the International Centre for Research into Animal Diseases was set up in 1977 to support research programmes at the institute. The library of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) was established along with its parent organisation in 1973 specifically to develop and maintain a comprehensive collection of information on the global state of the environment.

The Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) library was established in 1974 as a support facility for the parent body. KIE serves as a national curriculum development centre. The Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS) was established in 1975 as a government statutory body. The library is specifically charged with the collection, indexing, storing and dissemination of information on standards from local and overseas organisations.

The Industrial Research and Development Institute (KIRDI) and its library was established in 1977. KIRDI had its origin in the East African Industrial Research Organisation (EAIRO), an agency of the East African Community that collapsed in 1977. The library provides scientific, technical and industrial information in support of the many research activities taking place in the organisation. The Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) and the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Organisation (KEMFRO) were established along with KIRDI in 1977 after the collapse of

the East African Community. The libraries are charged with the task of supporting the research programmes taking place in the parent organisations.

The Kenya National Scientific Information Documentation and Communication Centre (KENSIDOC) was set up along with its parent body, the National Council for Science and Technology (NCST) by an Act of Parliament in 1977. NCST was charged with the following functions:

- to determine priorities for scientific and technological activities;
- to advise on a national science policy;
- to advise on organisational arrangements for scientific activities including the setting up of research councils, research communities and research establishments; and
- to carry out necessary research surveys and investigations.

KENSIDOC, an information wing of NCST, is responsible for the collection, organisation, storage and dissemination of information pertaining to research programmes conducted in science and technology.

Public Libraries

With independence came the end of racial discrimination in Kenya. Public libraries became accessible to all people irrespective of age, religion, race or social standing. All libraries that were initially confined to Asians and Europeans became accessible to Africans as well.

The Kenya National Library Services (KNLS), which began discharging its services from temporary premises in 1967, has managed to put up a purpose-built headquarters in Nairobi. From a skeleton staff of under ten and an initial collection of 25 000 volumes inherited from the EALB Library in Nairobi, KNLS has developed into a national network of public libraries comprising the headquarters, provincial, district and community library services (Weche 1982: 40). Recently, a 'camel' library service was introduced in Wajir in the dry North Eastern Province in an attempt to provide library services to the people in the remote areas. Attempts are also under way to introduce 'bicycle' library services commonly known as 'boda-boda' to inaccessible areas of western Kenya where mobile vans are unable to operate.

In 1987, KNLS was accorded a dual role as a national library by hosting a national reference and bibliographic agency. Since then, KNLS has been acting as a legal depository library for Kenya. It has also been publishing a national bibliography, the Kenya National Bibliography. KNLS has entered into partnership with the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Through this effort, KNLS is likely to establish itself as a model public library service for Africa. Already Carnegie has committed enormous funds for this ambitious project.

At present, public library services in Kenya are provided by two institutions: KNLS and MacMillan Memorial Library. While KNLS covers Nairobi and the rest of the country, MacMillan concentrates on the city of Nairobi and its environs. MacMillan maintains a main library in the city centre and three branch libraries in the suburbs. The former Sir Seif Bin Salim library in Mombasa was acquired by KNLS, and converted into a provincial library for the Coastal region.

Academic Libraries

The post-independence era also witnessed a marked development in education and, in particular, higher education. This has given rise to an enormous growth of academic libraries. At independence, Kenya did not have a fully-fledged university. The only institution of higher learning was Nairobi University College, a constituent college of the University of East Africa. Kenya established its first university, the University of Nairobi, in 1970 by upgrading the former college. This was followed in 1984 by Moi University in Eldoret, which was initially established as a university of science and technology, with an emphasis on research.

In 1987, Kenyatta University College, which for some time served as a constituent college of the University of Nairobi, became a fully-fledged university with bias in education and related programmes (Nganga 1982a: 29). Between 1987 and 2003, three additional universities were set up

in the country. These are Jomo Kenyatta University College of Agriculture and Technology (JKUCAT) in Juja near Thika, Egerton University in Njoro near Nakuru and Maseno University near Kisumu. At the same time, the Western University College of Science and Technology in Kakamega is being established as a constituent college of Moi University.

In addition to the above six public universities, Kenya plays host to a number of private universities. Among them are the United States International University-Nairobi Campus (USIU), Daystar University, Catholic University of East Africa, University of Eastern Africa at Baraton, Kenya Methodist University, Nazarene University, Keriri Women's University of Science and Technology; and Kabarak University.

All these universities have established libraries to support their programmes. Among the leading libraries is the University of Nairobi library, which has a network of branch libraries spread over seven campuses. Kenyatta University library has a medium library service centred on education. It has by far the richest collection on education in the country. However, only two libraries have fully automated services, namely, Moi University and USIU libraries. On currency of information, USIU leads the pack. The rest of the libraries and, in particular those owned by public universities, have had acute funding problems that have seriously affected their collection development programmes. The same problems have equally affected automation and accessibility to the Internet. Unlike South Africa, for instance, where many university students have free access to the Internet, most students in Kenya have to pay to access the information superhighway. This has seriously hindered access to current and comprehensive literature available in world databases.

School Libraries

The development of school libraries was slow at the beginning of this era. This has however picked up since the 1990s. The development of school libraries has tended to vary from school to school. The reason is the absence of a school library policy in the country. In the absence of the policy, the development of school libraries is left in the hands of headteachers whose attitude to libraries vary markedly (Maleche and Krystall 1973:30; Otiike 1987b:419). The performance of school libraries also depends on the age of the school. Schools established early in the colonial period have far more comprehensive collections compared to those established recently (Mulaha 1986). Furthermore, schools that were initially earmarked for Europeans have superior collections as these were developed on standards prevailing in Britain at the time.

Another category of schools that came on the scene in the 1990s is high-cost private schools. These were established specifically to cater for the diplomatic and expatriate communities in the country. The same schools have attracted the upper class Kenyans occupying senior positions in the private and public sector. A number of the schools offer curricula prevalent in the West. The majority of these schools have superior library services that can only be compared to those in the West. Many of them employ qualified librarians with competitive salary packages. Inferior library services are to be found in ordinary public and low-cost private schools. Many public schools do not allocate adequate funds for library services. At the same time, very little money is raised from low-cost private schools. Since the majority of the low-cost schools exist to make money, the poor financial returns they receive in the form of school fees are too insignificant to be invested in the school library. The majority of pupils in these private schools come from poor homes, who on account of their academic performance in primary schools, were unable to find places in government-funded secondary schools.

The Development of the Library Profession

A discussion on the development of libraries in the country is never complete without mentioning the growth of the library profession. The library association can be traced as far back as the 1950s. At this time, a number of libraries and in particular special libraries had mushroomed in East Africa. The majority of the libraries were to be found in Kenya. In 1956, the East Africa Library Association was established in Nairobi to cater for the professional interests of librarians in

the region. Practically all the officials and membership of the Association comprised British librarians, the majority being expatriates. In 1964, two branches were established in Kampala and Dar-es Salaam.

In 1972, the regional association was dissolved to give rise to national library associations. The following factors supported the need for national associations:

- the return of expatriate librarians to UK and appearance on the scene of African librarians;
- independence and sovereignty of the East African states necessitating national associations;
- the ideological differences in the region after independence; and
- the political instability in Uganda during the dictatorship and inhuman regime of Idi Amin affected security and communication in the region.

In 1973, national library associations were established. When dissolving the East African Library Association, members expressed a need to have a loose union that would bring together professionals from the three East African states for the purpose of meeting and exchanging views and issues pertaining to the profession. The result was the establishment of the Standing Conference for East African Librarians (SCEAL). Since 1972, a number of states in the Eastern, Central and Southern African region have joined the movement to become the Standing Conference for Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL) (Otiike 1993: 136).

Kenya Library Association (KLA) was charged with following objectives (Nganga 1990:135):

- to organise, unite in fellowship and represent the professions concerned with information work in Kenya and to associate with similar professional societies elsewhere;
- to promote professional integrity and to govern the members of the association in all matters of professional practice;
- to advance the science of information work by establishing and maintaining standards of professional education, training and practice;
- to encourage the promotion, establishment and improvement of library, archives and documentation services; and
- to promote and encourage study and research in all aspects of information work, and to regularly publish the official journal and any other professional literature.

From a humble beginning in 1973, KLA has established itself as a leading library association in Eastern Africa. In 1983, it hosted the Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA) Conference, followed in 1984 by the IFLA Conference. This was the first time that IFLA held such a programme on the African continent. In addition to the above, KLA has been credited with the establishment of an information sciences programme at Moi University and setting up a national bibliographic agency at KNLS. It has and continues to advise the Government on matters pertaining to libraries and the library profession in Kenya.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the growth of libraries and library profession in Kenya. From humble beginnings in the early twentieth century, Kenyan libraries appear to have made great strides in the recent past. Since libraries exist to support development activities, it can be stated that libraries in Kenya have kept abreast of national development. One of the major challenges that libraries and the profession will face in the new millennium is how to cope with electronic or paperless literature. Librarians in Kenya will have no option but to embrace the concept of 'libraries without walls'.

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