

PSC-CUNY Grant Project Description  
**A rural community library in Africa: a study of its use and users**

## **Introduction**

The Kitengesa Community Library project was started in 2001 by Professor Kate Parry of the Hunter College English department. A grant from the UN One Per Cent for Development Fund enabled a one-room library to be built near the trading center of Kitengesa, in Buwunga sub-county of Masaka District in Uganda. The library, formally opened on June 22, 2002, currently has a collection of 800 books, and a small staff who work with the community and local secondary school to provide access to books to roughly 30 members of the community and about 100 school students.

The researchers, librarians with backgrounds in information science and an interest in literacy and reading skills will conduct this research. They will also use the expertise of Professor Parry as a consultant. Prof. Parry received her Ed.D. from Columbia University and her primary area of research is applied linguistics. Her publications include *Culture, Literacy, and Learning English: Voices from the Chinese Classroom* (with Su Xiaojun, Heinemann, 1998) and *Language and Literacy in Uganda* (Fountain Publishers, 2000). Professor Parry recently served as one of the leading organizers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pan African Conference on Reading for All (co-sponsored by the International Reading Association and the Reading Association of Uganda). She regularly spends intersessions and summers in the area, working on various literacy projects, and with more than 23 years of experience in the area of literacy and reading, her unique expertise will greatly enhance this research project.

The objective of the study is to gather information about the use and users of this rural community library, and to produce a report of the findings, which would include a profile of the reading community. This will be accomplished through observation, interviews, and focus groups. These methods will allow the researchers to investigate a number of important questions, including:

- a)Who in the community uses the library***
- b)How users go about finding books/information in the library***
- c)What kinds of materials they are using/most used***
- d)What kinds of informal education practices are taking place at the library***
- e)How the library has made a difference in the lives of users***

Preliminary data collection – patron and circulation statistics for the library (kept by hand by the library assistant and later transferred into an Access database by Professor Parry) – have been kept since its opening, and will provide “starter” data for the project.

Once compiled and analyzed, this information will be useful for Kitengesa and other rural community libraries to better understand how patrons use the library, the kinds of material that might be most useful in libraries of this type, and the kinds of programs and services users are likely to need. Though there is a growing international interest in literacy in Africa, there is a noticeable void in the literature on the topic, and certainly a lack of published first-hand user studies. This project will lay the groundwork for future research – such as a study of the impact of the library on the Kitengesa community - and add to the professional literature through publication.

The project would be based at the Kitengesa Community Library. A comfortable connection with community members/library users is crucial to the success of this study, and library staff (2) will help to facilitate interactions with users. Though some in Kitengesa speak English, a local translator will be used to help bridge any communication gaps. The nature of the work, workload, and timeframe warrant two researchers to carry out the work, and the requested budget amount reflects the *minimum* amount for the researchers to successfully accomplish this research while operating in a unique rural environment without electricity. The project will take an estimated 5-8 weeks to complete.

## **Background**

Public libraries in Africa do not share the same popularity and support that we are accustomed to in the United States. They are often criticized for being out of touch with their users and not responsive to their needs. As a result, library services are not used by the majority of the population where these services exist (Mostert 1998, 10). In *African Public Library Systems: a Literature Survey*, B.J. Mostert gives several reasons for this phenomenon. One is that libraries are based on an anachronistic and inappropriate colonial model (Mostert 2001, 2). This has resulted in library collections reflective of a Western worldview that has little relevance to African library users, books that are mostly written in English that cannot be read by much of the population, and the lack of a publishing industry to produce materials of interest to an African audience. Another reason cited is the deficiencies in determining specific needs through analysis (Mostert 2001, 4). It has been wrongly assumed that library users in Africa would have the same needs as those in Europe and the United States, thus no effort has been made to study the user-needs or the information-seeking behaviors of Africans (Mostert 2001). These views of the problems existing in African libraries are prevalent throughout the literature (Issak 2000).

One alternative to the Western model of libraries that has shown success in Africa is the community library. Community libraries are established by and for the local population. Community leaders, schools, and churches may be involved and access to the library is given to all 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 (Mostert 1998).

The Kitengesa Community Library in Uganda is one such place. It is located near the trading center of Kitengesa, in Buwunga sub-county of Masaka. Education is well established there, with five primary schools and one secondary school in the immediate neighborhood. Although much of the community can read, if not in English at least in the local language, Luganda, most of the population has no access to reading materials. In 1997, Kate Parry received a PSC-CUNY research award to study literacy in Kitengesa. As a result of her research, she found that the need for reading material was not being met and donated 200 books to the secondary school to be used by students and the community. Since then, with the help of a grant from the United Nations One Per Cent for Development Fund, the headmaster of the secondary school has built a one-room library on the school's land and Professor Parry has raised over \$2,500 to expand the collection of books. The choice of books has been guided by the following factors: the availability of books in Uganda, especially of ones produced by Ugandan publishers, since these publishers can be presumed to be responding to perceived local demand;

the preferences of students in the school as evidenced by their choices when borrowing from the initial small collection, and by their reports on who besides themselves either read or listened to the books; and, the suggestions made in focus group discussions in which participants, who represented various groups in the community, were asked to state which books they would purchase, considering the funds available and the prices of the books. Also, a concerted effort was made to purchase any books that were available in Luganda.

The Library has grown in users since its inception, and it has increased the prestige of the Kitengesa Comprehensive Secondary School. As more money is raised and the numbers of library users grow, it is imperative that the material and services provided continue to meet the needs of the users. In addition, in an informal door-to-door survey that was conducted in 2002, 1,000 potential users of the library were identified. These are people who said they were interested in the library but have not joined. It is equally important to explore what is keeping these potential users from the library and what would attract other non-users to the library.

The researchers believe that the Kitengesa Community Library would be an excellent environment to conduct a user study, a topic of research that is in great demand in Africa. This area is attractive for several reasons. First, the Kitengesa Community Library is an innovative project that is based at the secondary school but also serves the rural community at-large. This makes the library unusual – though there are six rural information centers in Uganda, all of the public libraries (23 total) are located in urban areas such as Kampala (Byamugisha et al. 2001). Also, because schools have existed in this area for some time, the community has a large number of adult readers. In addition, the community has an expanding population of new readers as a result of free universal primary education that was introduced in Uganda in 1997. The needs of such readers have not been examined; and the work that Prof. Parry has already done in determining which books to buy suggests that there are interesting variations between genders and among different sectors of the community.

The researchers are also at an advantage because Professor Parry has been involved since the library's inception, and had the forethought to record all patron information and circulation information. An analysis of that information, along with observation, interviews, and focus groups will allow the researchers to produce a detailed profile of library users, an evaluation of the library collection, and a profile of the information and reading needs of the community (see **Project Design**).

This research will make a significant contribution on several important levels:

1. It will add to the body of library literature which is lacking in this area.
2. It will add to the literature on literacy, especially regarding the ways in which newly-literate people are using reading material.
3. It will allow existing libraries on the African continent to extrapolate the data for use in their own communities, as well as provide a model for the creation of new community libraries.
4. It will help in the development of a methodological framework for rural libraries across Africa to conduct studies of their own users.

## **Project Design**

- a. Orientation to environment – It is very important that the participants and community members feel comfortable with the researchers. It is also important for the researchers to be respectful of boundaries and the privacy of the participants. The researchers intend to spend time (1 week) at the outset of the project meeting people informally, including community members, teachers and students at the Kitengesa Secondary School, and others who may be a part of the project.
- b. Observation period – The researchers intend to observe user activities within the library to get a better sense of who uses the library, what materials they select, the role of the library staff in interacting with the users, and basically, how the community uses the library. These observations will form a core part of the project. Researchers will record these observations using a laptop computer, and possibly self-audiorecordings for compiling notes later. These observations will take approximately 1-2 weeks and will be paired with the next step, data collection.
- c. Data collection – The researchers will gather data using three distinct methods: interviews, focus groups and circulation and patron statistics. This lengthy part of the project will take approximately 3+ weeks.

**Interviews** – The researchers will conduct home visits to target specific groups of readers, including:

1. The most frequent users of the library
2. Adults who previously expressed a keen interest in joining the library (see page 2, paragraph 4) but have not yet followed through
3. Those who have recently left the secondary school
4. Adult reader participants in the adult literacy class currently being held in the library

First-hand information about who in the household does the reading, who is being read to and the nature of what they are reading will be important questions. We also hope to survey the types of books, if any, household members own. By conducting first-hand interviews in this manner, we hope to gain valuable insight into the role of the library in the community. Sample interview questions:

1. Do you prefer reading books in English or Luganda?
2. Do you plan to visit the library (for the non-user)?
3. What would you most like to read about?
4. Do you like to read books that will help you learn things you can use in your everyday life?
5. When do you have free time?
6. What do you do with your free time?
7. When do you prefer to read?
8. How have you benefited from having the library here in Kitengesa?

**Focus Groups** – The focus groups will follow the interviews and will be conducted using questions and exercises designed to elicit feedback on the types of material participants read, the kind of materials they would buy if they could, and how their decisions would be affected by considerations of the price; the data will thus be comparable to that obtained by Prof. Parry in her first focus groups and will show how the preferences and needs of the community have developed as more books have become available. The

focus groups will include: schoolchildren from the Kitengesa school first level, schoolchildren from the Kitengesa school second level, teachers from the primary school, teachers from the secondary school, “neighbors” or parents, members (community members who pay \$1/year to use the library and are not affiliated with the school) and non-members. The groups will range in size from 5-8 people. The researchers will alternate recording/transcribing the focus groups and conducting them. Focus group meetings will most likely take place in the library and/or the school.

**Circulation/Patron Statistics** – The researchers will have access to a database of circulation statistics, developed by Prof. Parry, that will be used to gather, compile and analyze circulation data. We hope to look at who is using the library (particular points of interest include the male to female ratio, age, those who have completed schooling, and those who have dropped out) the kinds of materials they are checking out and/or reading in the library, and whether readers are reading new material or the same material over and over. This will be an ongoing process that will run the length of the entire project.

- d. Data Compilation & Findings – Once the above information has been gathered, the researchers will prepare a detailed report. The report will consist of a profile of the users of the Kitengesa Community Library, evaluation of the current collection, including data on the types of material most used and/or borrowed from the library, and a profile of the information and reading material needs of the readers. A literature review suggests that there have not been many first-hand user studies of the rural community library, thus publications detailing this research would add an important layer to the literature. The researchers would work with Professor Parry to co-publish the findings of the study, as well as co-present the findings at conferences such as the 4<sup>th</sup> Pan African Conference on Reading for All to be held in Swaziland in 2005. Professional journals in both library science and reading/literacy would be likely places to seek publication. A preliminary letter of interest from the journal, *Library and Information Science Research*, is attached as an example. This final part of the project will be completed upon return to the States.

## References

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