

# The spirit of the (West) African libraries - A response to Shiraz Durrani and Kay Raseroka

Mikael Bök



Mikael Bök in Accra, February 2006. Photo: Ralph Amissah

Mikael Bök, M.A., is an adult educationist and founder (1992) of a cooperative society (Katto-Meny) of associations, libraries, authors, journalists and companies that use the internet. He is an active member of the Network Institute for Global Democratisation (NIGD).

In this article, I shall discuss whether and how the traditional library can respond to the needs of the people of Africa, taking as my point of departure two excellent, but seemingly contradictory pieces on the subject, written by Shiraz Durrani and Kay Raseroka.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Durrani, Shiraz : *Will Nyanjiru be silenced?*, and Raseroka, Kay: *Social inclusion and information needs: an exploration*. The two texts were published together in the Swedish Leftist library review *BiS* 2:2005, pp. 20-24. Both are available in English at <http://www.foreningenbis.org/socialutest.html>. - Durrani's text appeared originally in *University of Nairobi Library Magazine*, No. 4, 1980. It has since been re-published in *Information for Social Change (ISC)* No. 7, Summer 1998. A German translation appeared

Durrani tells about a young peasant woman, Nyanjiru, who has to work around the clock in order to satisfy her family's basic needs : food, clothing and shelter. The hardship of Nyanjiru stands in sharp contrast to the life of Kamau, a librarian, who provides a service that has been set up and is being maintained "through 'assistance' from a colonial, neo-colonial 'mother' country".

The information needs of Nyanjiru, according to Durrani, are clear: "she wants information which will help her to produce and protect her material requirements". Yet Kamau's library is totally inaccessible to her and cannot help her in any way. "Nyanjiru knows no library, and no library knows Nyanjiru". Worse, Nyanjiru is unacceptable to the librarians because their rules, like "Silence please in the library!", simply rule her out. So the question which starts and ends Durrani's piece is, "Will Nyanjiru be silenced?"

Raseroka counters<sup>2</sup> Durrani's story about Nyanjiru with an example of how people can benefit from the library even if they never would set a foot inside its walls. The story is told from the viewpoint of an old woman, whose daughter, Thandi, is dying of AIDS. Thandi's own young daughters are helping their grandmother to manage the difficult situation. Not only are they helping, they are also contributing crucial information about hygiene and AIDS care. Participating in an "action programme" of the public library they have learned, for instance, to wear gloves when touching a HIV/AIDS patient. At first, the grandmother thinks that it is strange that she should wear gloves when treating her own child. Her grand-daughter, on the other hand, is a person whom she feels that she can trust. So she agrees to use "the finger socks" and the whole family gets a moment of relief.

To quote Raseroka, this shows how libraries can "position themselves as mediators of information between children who use library resources as part of their learning about life skills and communities they come from", and also how they can "facilitate intergenerational discussion on and social inclusion of traditional life skills, indigenous knowledge and cultural values held by communities as an integral part of adaptation to changing ways of life epitomised by reading and television".

---

in *People Without Places - Die Bibliothek als Fluchtpunkt* (1999).

Shiraz Durrani is a London-based teacher of library science. He wrote "Will Nyanjiru be silenced?" when he still worked as a librarian in Kenya.

<sup>2</sup> It is a little bit unclear whether Kay Raseroka actually wrote her article in response to Shiraz Durrani. Kay Raseroka is working as a librarian at the University of Botswana. From 2003 to 2005 she was the chairperson of IFLA.



*Illustration 1 An internet café in Accra (Ghana)*

The stories told by Durrani and Raseroka contain important messages about the relevance (and irrelevance) of the library for the majority of common people in Africa. Seemingly, the messages contradict each other. Durrani wants to go straight ahead to the political problem while Kay Raseroka points to a question which lies beyond the sphere of immediate politics: the necessity of a scientific culture. Is this a so called antagonistic contradiction? Are Durrani and Raseroka really speaking about the the same thing, and if they do, are they missing each others points? What are these stories? Perhaps not so much stories about libraries as stories about how people live and die in present-day Africa. What are the limits of what one may reasonably call a library?

These questions are enough to produce a mental cramp. I should like to relax that tension by telling an own story.



*Illustration 2* Participants in the polycentric World Social Forum in Bamako (Mali), 18-24 January 2006, discuss world economy and politics. Photo by M.B.

First, some words about the library workshop at the World Social Forum (WSF) in Bamako (Mali) in January.<sup>3</sup> Neither Shiraz Durrani or Kay Raseroka were there in person. But they managed to make their presence felt even in their absence.

The library workshop was intended as a follow-up of a discussion on "the role of the library in the democratization of information" with Indian LIS (library and information professionals) at the WSF in Mumbai 2004. Kay Raseroka, who gave the keynote speech, called upon all LIS to participate in the WSF together with the social movements and activists who gather at those events. Moreover, they should pull their straw to the stack. She proposed that the LIS engage in documenting the hundreds of international conferences, seminars and workshops of the WSF in their libraries.<sup>4</sup>

This proposal we continued to discuss in Bamako, and the discussion led to a decision: the documentation of WSF by the LIS shall begin during the WSF in Nairobi in January 2007. Shiraz Durrani deserves some credit for the progress from only saying it to actually doing it. The Progressive African Library and Information Activists

---

<sup>3</sup> For background and reports, see <http://www.nigd.org/libraries/bamako-nairobi>

<sup>4</sup> The library workshop at the WSF in Mumbai is documented at <http://www.nigd.org/libraries/mumbai>

Group (PALIAct), of which Durrani is a founder will be needed to push forward with the plan. (A main purpose of PALIAct will be to tackle the question of a "relevant" African public library service.)

In order to cover all the information from the mammoth WSF event in Nairobi 2007, hundreds of librarians must participate, says Kenya Library Association (KLA) secretary Esther Obachi, one of the speakers at the library workshop in Bamako. By consequence, Esther is now planning the "training of the trainers", a course for the LIS who are to organise the documentation of the Nairobi WSF.

The LIS will need to be introduced to the main themes of the WSF, which are mostly about understanding the connections between the causes of the local social and environmental problems and injustices on the one hand, and the policies and agendas of the global political and economical actors on the other hand. The lack of water, or the lack of relevant public library service, are examples of local problems. The World Trade Organisation (WTO) with its neoliberal regimes on trade in services and intellectual property rights, is a major example of the global structures which the WSF is setting out to challenge. The implications of the GATS and TRIPS agreements are especially important for the future of the libraries.<sup>5</sup>

In order to fulfil the task of documenting the WSF and presenting it in their libraries, the LIS may also need to improve their journalistic skills and to think through the ethical and juridical aspects. A formula for the preservation, presentation and dissemination of the information from the WSF in or via the libraries will have to be invented. This amounts to an ambitious agenda indeed. Especially as the funding of the project is still (March 2006) a question that remains to be answered.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Rikowski, Ruth: Globalisation, Information and Libraries. Chandos. Oxford 2005.



Phone booth. On the road between Bamako (Mali) and Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso). Photo MB

Finished the library workshop in Mali, I stepped on the bus back to Accra (Ghana) via Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso). From Ghana, I was to return by air to Finland. During this journey I would gather some first hand information about the library situation in West Africa. Or so I thought.

Wherever I came, I saw the words telephone and telecommunication, often also the word internet, written on signposts and walls. However humble the house or the hut, yet it was a node in the global network of communication and information which helps the African to stay in contact with his millions of brothers and sisters in the diaspora. The modern library is also a particular node in that network. To me, therefore, all those phone- and internetbooths looked like as many potential libraries. I also got to see a number of libraries in the traditional meaning of the word. More about them later.

At the WSF in Porto Alegre some years ago I got acquainted with Clémentine Ouedraogo from Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, where she is leading the women's organisation Promo Femmes.

A colleague of Clémentine by the name of Agathe Ouedraogo functions as *animatrice* at Promo Femmes' film shows and discussions about womens' rights. One evening I accompany Agathe to Korom, a village some 30 miles from the capital.

When we arrive at 8 pm, the villagers have already gathered in the dark (the village lacks electricity) in front of the school. They are many: both men and women, the school's teacher and the school's pupils, the parents with their children.

While the generator is started and the film projector is rigged, Agathe shows me the results of the cooperation with the people in Korom. We take a look at the drilled well (*le forage*), the grainstore (*la banque de céréales*), the mill and the brewery where the women make *dolo*, the local beer. These small-scale constructions are run by

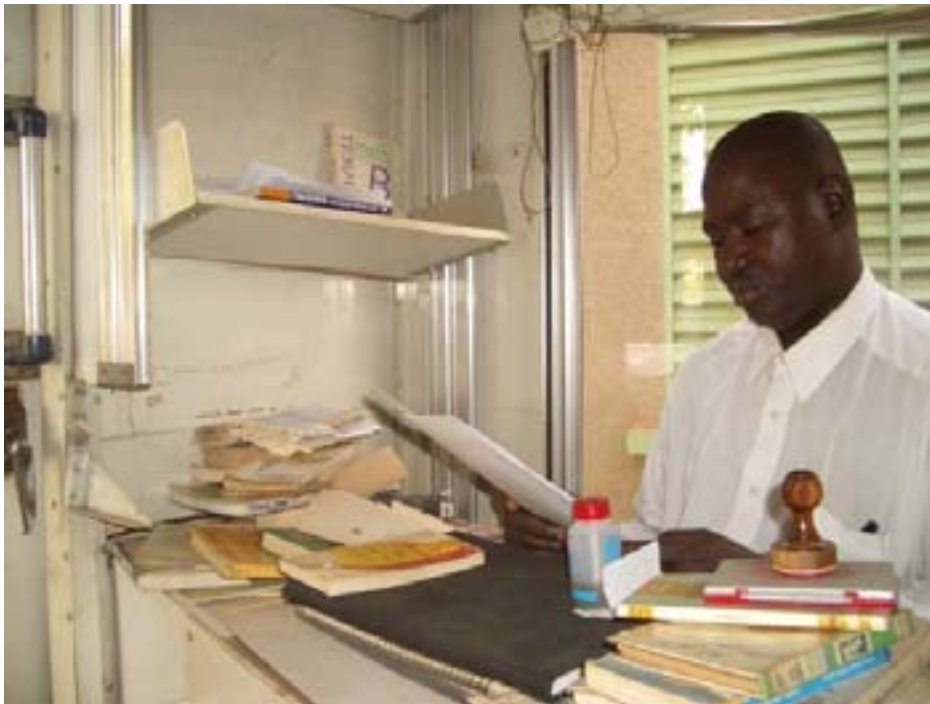
women's committees and financed by credits from Promo Femmes. The investment for the drilling of the well was made by Church World Service.

One more establishment has to be mentioned, namely, the "alphabetisation room" (*la salle d'alphabétisation*) in which Promo Femmes arranges courses of two months, six hours per day.

Tonight we see an amateur production of Promo Femmes on the movie screen. It tells, in tempo allegretto, about the prevention of a forced marriage between a young girl and a village chief. The message is received with spontaneous reactions during and a lively debate after the show.

Ask me what popular education is and I shall point to the activities of Promo Femmes in Korom.

But don't ask me whether popular education has anything to do with libraries. Because, then I'll answer that the questioner doesn't have an inkling of the precarious library situation in Burkina Faso (or anywhere else for that matter).



*Emmanuel Tassambedo in his mobile library. Ouagadougou, Januari 2006. Photo MB.*

The library is relevant for Africans, if only its animators find the right spirit. All libraries must be animated. All libraries need a spirit. The spirit of the libraries is not created by the books. It is created by the librarians.

I am looking for the spirit of the libraries in Ouagadougou. What do I find? I find a library bus which some citizens in the French city of Grenoble donated to the Burkinabe a number of years ago.

The library bus serves the colleges of the city. Here the college students may borrow French schoolbooks from the 1980ies and 1990ies, but also novels by Enid Blyton,

Honoré de Balzac, John le Carre and Rudyard Kipling plus the selection of novels by Reader's Digest (in French) from 1956, 1957, 1958... A strange collection of books from other times and other parts of the world! However, what is a library if it does not provide all kinds of books, including books of more or less dubious quality? Here is also *Le livre de Li Po, un des plus grands poètes Chinois, 701-762*. Did the great university libraries of medieval Timbuctu, the cradle of the African literary tradition, offer books from China to their visitors? Ibn Battuta, the 14th century traveller, would have stayed a week in Ouagadougou just to read these Chinese poems, I speculate.

The funny thing is that most of the books in the book bus are so tattered. The borrowers, the college students of Ouagadougou, have obviously read these books, and read them once again. The kids cry for new books, says Emmanuel Tassambedo, the symphatethic driver and animator of this mobile library. Cry? Yes they cry, he confirms.

All the books in the book bus carry a stamp: *DASE. Direction de l' Action Sociale et de l' Education de la commune d' Ouagadougou*. Emmanuel closes for the day and I go to DASE in order to find out more about the libraries of Ougadougou.

The official at DASE assures that each arrondissement of the city has its own library. There is also a central city library. I get the address.

The City Library lies further away than expected. It is already 4.45 pm when I arrive, and they are going to close at five. Today they are already closed. After all, is it really a library?

On the sign-board outside the library I read

COMMUNE DE OUAGADOUGOU  
DIRECTION DES ARCHIVES  
DEL LA DOCUMENTATION  
ET DE LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE

The office of the library staff, thus, rather than the library itself. Library directors without a library, isn't that a little bit like generals without an army? Generals, however, are said to be able to create an army when they need one. Couldn't the library chiefs also find a remedy for the miserable situation? Start a library movement? PALIAct? WSF?

\*

Back in Accra, I visit the *The George Padmore Research Library of Africa Affairs* in the hope that I would find relevant literature about African federalism.

The Padmore library is not in as good condition as it was when i went here for the first time in 1969. One cannot avoid noticing that it has not got internet, nor an online public access catalogue. But it certainly has got a catalogue.

I have to admit that I enjoy the silence which reigns in the reading-room of the Padmore



*The reading-room of the George Padmore Library in Accra. - Photo MB, Febr 2006.*

library. It is relishing to get away from the loud and big agglomeration that Accra has become. In these days, they are building so many new churches and mosques in Accra. I wish they would build new libraries instead!

The Padmore librarians help me to find interesting books about the attempt of Modibo Keita, Léopold Sédar Senghor and others to found the Mali Federation at the end of the 1950ies.

It would be important, today, to save the thoughts of such African leaders as Modibo Keita from oblivion, and to rethink the relations between European Union and Africa from a federalist and anti-colonialist perspective. Modibo Keita was the first president of the republic of Mali (formerly French Sudan) from 1960 to 1968, and the Prime Minister of the union between Mali and Senegal (the Mali Federation, 1959-60), which was originally planned to include several of the new independent states of French West Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Shiraz Durrani would probably agree, and maybe Kay Raseroka too. Kay Raseroka is right, of course,- I am now thinking about her story about "the finger socks". The time has not passed for the enlightenment. The library can and it should continue to be of help to the peoples, directly and indirectly, in their effort to kill the pest and the war.

---

<sup>6</sup> "The connotations of federalism could be both radical and conservative and depended on the user and the precise referent if, as was not often the case, this latter was made clear. As a subject for impassioned political oratory it was ideal; as a means of clearly delineating issues, it left much to be desired. *It soon became the dominant theme of French West African politics.*" (3) Cf. Foltz, William J.: *From French West Africa to the Mali Federation*. Yale University Press 1965, p. 68. Italics added.

\*

The library knows no borders. The library is neither a European nor an African invention. Rather Africa and Europe, just like Asia, America and Australia were invented in the library. The library is as old as the society and the state. The names of the various parts of the world are of more recent dates, once they start to appear in the myths and in the literature.

The concept of federalism needs to be given clear meaning. The librarians should take the initiative by creating a world library, which helps humanity throw off the yoke of the empires and the nationalisms. The economic and technological condition of the world library is at hand. It is called the internet. The internet and the library are actually one and the same. Or, as Ranganathan wrote: the library is a growing organism. Internet is just the newest branch on the growing stem of the library.

The internet is cybernetic, it governs itself. To the extent that *internet governance* is needed, it is not a task for governments, nor for private corporations. That task, e.g. the management of the names and the numbers which bring order to the digital information, belongs to the library.



*Esther Obachi (right) and Mary Wanjohi from Kenya speaking at the library workshop of the WSF in Mali, Jan 2006. Photo MB*