



Libraries for Living: the KidsLibs Trust Kenya

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[170](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Beverley Naidoo describes how recent events have affected community libraries.

In January this year riots erupted across Kenya following a presidential election which was widely seen as rigged.

Beverley Naidoo, author of a children's novel set in Kenya during the State of Emergency, reflects on the continuing historical impact of colonialism. She also describes how the recent tumultuous events have affected KidsLibs Trust Kenya's Libraries for Living, an organisation which sets up libraries in communities.

Hi All, Thank you for your messages. Yes things are bad in places here... all places where KidsLibs Trust has centres. Mathare North (where we have a centre) has been very badly burnt out, rather like Kibera. Stephan and Charles the staff at Mathare North library (one Kikuyu and one Luya) have both had their houses burnt out, and lost everything. They are now living in the reading room of the library which Thank God has not been touched as yet. Joshe who runs Eastleigh centre lives in Kariobangi North. They saw some awful violence? bodies on the street, friend fighting friend, bodies still to be found in houses??

This message from Anne Moore, a British children's librarian in Nairobi and founder of KidsLibs Trust, arrived in my Inbox on 3 January. It was early days in the violence that followed the presidential elections in Kenya. How often do we watch or read news that horrifies us yet when we switch the channel or turn the page, it recedes? With so many headlines vying for our attention, how easy it is to forget unless we have some personal connection.

I made my first visit to Kenya four years ago. I was invited to open 'officially' a small community library in Mathare North. The two-week author tour was to be part of the British High Commission's 'UKenya' events marking Kenya's 40th year of independence from Britain. Anne Moore, who was voluntarily helping community organisations set up and run libraries, had suggested me because of my Africa-British connection. The intensive programme was as memorable as it was unsettling. Indeed the experience prompted me into thinking of Kenya as a setting for a novel and led to **Burn My Heart**.

Libraries of all kinds

My visit zigzagged from private schools, where libraries compared with the best of British, to places where a 'library' was a few shelves in a cupboard with a handful of tattered books. Nothing in my birth country South Africa had quite prepared me for my visit to the library at Mathare North. The apartheid state made sure that its police and army could drive their trucks and tanks swiftly into the heart of the vast urban 'townships' like Soweto and Khayelitsha. Outside Nairobi, however, the road into the gigantic slum of Mathare seemed more like a treacherous, winding 'donga' - one of our deep South African ditches. We descended into a sea of rusty corrugated iron flowing with human activity. Our vehicle jolted and shook as it jostled with people between homemade dwellings and stalls where it looked as if anything could be bought from freshly-ironed Man U shirts to batteries, buckets, mobile phones and goat meat. No inch of space was left idle. What were the piles of plastic bags, I asked? 'Flying toilets.' Most of Mathare has no proper sewerage. The more difficult question that hammered in my brain was 'How do people find the energy to survive daily in a place

like this?? Here was a picture from an underworld completely removed from the tourist brochure of luxury hotels, beaches and expanses of bush awaiting the safari traveller.

[image:At the Mathare North Library, Kenya.jpg:left]

The two tiny rooms of Mathare North Library, packed with readers and donated books, seemed to defy the reality around us. The Mathare Youth Sports Association, the community organisation that runs the library with KidsLibs Trust support and advice, says on its website: 'The introduction of libraries in MYSAs was a dream to many youth?? A young MYSAs boy gave me a football made entirely of plastic bags held tightly together by string. I still have it. Such ingenuity and creativity had to signal hope against the odds.

Two other notable memories from that first trip were of orphans ? animal and human. On my first morning, I was taken to Feeding Time at the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. Crowds of tourists watched the enchanting elephant orphans being bottle-fed their specially produced milk. In the afternoon, we visited Bethlehem Community Centre, a children?s orphanage in Soweto, a district of Kayole. In the shell of a library being built by the British High Commission as a special UKKenya project, the young people sang and presented personal, moving stories to us, their visitors, and a local audience. No tourists lining up here to peek into the orphanage?s food storage room and see that it was almost bare.

My tour took me across the Highlands to Nakuru and gave me the chance to explore some family connections. When I was a baby, an older cousin had married a Kenyan settler. Growing up in South Africa, I was vaguely aware of frightening ?Mau Mau? attacks on white farms in the early 1950s. I heard that my cousin?s family were ?sticking it out? during the State of Emergency. It wasn?t until I read Ngugi wa Thiong'o?s novels in the 1960s, that another world opened to me ? that of Africans dispossessed of their land and freedom, who experienced the terror of unfettered white power. This was the world that most white colonials chose to ignore. When Kenya became independent, my cousin?s family came to apartheid South Africa. In one of those twists of history, their youngest son became involved in the anti-apartheid struggle as a committed trade unionist and died in the hands of the security police.

I wanted to see where this younger cousin had spent his early years. The German baron who had bought the family?s farm beneath Mount Kenya was still there and hospitable. He offered tea and a drive across the vast expanse of bush that was his land. En route, he caught ? and dismissed on the spot ? a worker illegally burning charcoal. I was thrown back into my childhood. The resentment in the eyes of this man, wearing little more than tatters, evoked a residual memory of witnessing explosively repressed anger and humiliation. As a white child I had no understanding of what such anger was about. Instead of any rational explanation, like most other white children, I imbibed a mixture of adult prejudices and silences.

Understanding the historical threads

I returned from my first visit to Kenya thinking about a new novel. What stories are there for young people that open up these silences? Like children in colonial Britain, I was brought up on books in which black characters, if they ever made an appearance, were likely to be savages, servants or comic buffoons. While the diversity of characters and themes has grown significantly, what historical novels are there for young people today that illuminate this uncomfortable past within Africa? It is not a distant past but one that still affects our present. Sadly, very few British teenagers know about and want to read the great African writers who invited me into their worlds and who so expanded my own horizons.

In the adult market, stories about extravagant Happy Valley aristocrats and their ?set? in Kenya (?Keenya?) continue to find a following. Perhaps they provide a kind of fantasy for readers to imagine themselves in a paradise of sundowners with big-game hunters and white women who know how to remain chic in the bush. However, what happened in Kenya was Britain?s most violent end of empire on the continent. The State of Emergency called to protect the settlers, with fifty-five thousand British troops brought in to crush the Mau Mau, was a disaster for the Kikuyu people already dispossessed of their fertile ancestral land beneath their great mountain Kirinyaga ? Mount Kenya. Thirty-two European settlers were killed in the Mau Mau attacks, although British people who recall the period say that ?it seemed like more?. Betrayal and murder by servants carried a particular imaginative terror. However, thousands of Africans

disappeared or died, largely unreported, as a bitter civil war developed amongst Kikuyus forced to take sides between Mau Mau and loyalists. A further twelve thousand Kikuyu Mau Mau suspects and fighters were killed by British forces, in addition to a hundred and fifty thousand suspects detained in prison camps.

My novel is not, of course, about numbers but about two boys ? Mathew, an English settler boy, and Mugo, a Kikuyu boy, the ?kitchen toto? whose grandfather was dispossessed by Mathew?s grandfather. I wanted to imagine them at the time of the State of Emergency and how the furnace of events affects their unequal relationship. It is a profoundly different kind of tale from a fantasy. Apart from drawing my readers into a tragedy of friendship, betrayal and loss, I think that a little more understanding of our own historical threads linking Britain to Kenya is valuable when viewing the complex weave of what is happening in Kenya today. The initial surprise expressed by the first reporters on the post-election violence reflected the kind of ignorance that is all too common when it comes to African matters.

As the violence and its aftermath continue, there have been occasional articles by more knowledgeable and insightful writers, including Kenyans. We have begun to hear about access to resources, especially land. While today?s politicians in Kenya, both government and opposition, must take responsibility for their own words and actions, colonial rule frequently reinforced ethnic divisions in how resources were allocated. In time, a fuller picture may emerge of how it is that neighbours have turned on neighbours and friends on friends. In the meantime, I wait for news of what is happening to KidsLibs Trust staff, their libraries and their dreams. Here is an extract from Anne Moore?s latest email:

?The libraries are all in one piece still ? so far? Steve and his wife have now been able to move out [of Mathare North library] to a safer place due to the kindness of some friend of mine who donated five months? rent at a safe place in area 3 Mathare North. Charles is still in the library... scared and alone at night.

We managed to open Kawangware centre on Saturday last week! Over 250 kids turned up who sang and danced, and about 30 parents came... of all ethnic persuasions. It was a joy to see them all dancing together. No police just FUN!! I think our centres can offer a place for unity as well as all the other services they provide.?

For more information on KidsLibs Trust, see kidslibstrust.org [3] or email: kidslibs@hotmail.com [4]

Burn My Heart by Beverley Naidoo is published by Puffin (978 0 14 132124 0, £5.99 pbk).

 [Children in Mathare North, Kenya.jpg](#) [5]

 [At the Mathare North Library, Kenya.jpg](#) [6]

Children in Mathare North, Kenya

Page Number:

3

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