African Poetry Libraries-A Global Collaboration

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

African Poetry Libraries—
A Global Collaboration

Lorna Dawes and Charlene Maxey-Harris

Introduction

In 2014, the African Poetry Book Fund\(^1\) (APBF) and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) literary magazine, the *Prairie Schooner*, established African Poetry Libraries in five countries—Botswana, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda—to support the creativity of aspiring and established poets in their local communities. The UNL librarians were asked to serve as consultants on the initiative by working with local volunteers to set up the libraries and provide ongoing assistance and advice to the new libraries during the first three years of their operation. The goals of the libraries are to support the local community of poets through access to contemporary poetry and to serve as a resource for poets interested in publication in Africa and around the world. The collections are comprised of solicited donations from US and UK publishers, and each library receives 300–400 books annually for the first three years, after which the libraries become completely self-directed and self-sufficient. This chapter will describe the highlights of this innovative initiative and the development of the partnership between the APBF and the University of Nebraska University Libraries that has shaped a global connection between literary arts organizations and publishers in the US and UK, African libraries, writer’s co-ops, cultural centers, and poets.

As academic libraries are aligning their priorities to the campus directives and strategic plans, they are focusing on intercultural exchanges, global experiences, and knowledge brokering in new and exciting ways. New themes, like knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange, express the need for libraries to add value not only to their college and university but also to the local, national, and international community. The University of Hong Kong refocused its direction to a knowledge exchange emphasis by distributing grants
to eight universities to support programs that engaged in knowledge exchange activities, such as exhibitions, book talks, and other innovative professional exchanges. Themes supporting community engagement and global exchanges between academic libraries and the community are increasingly popular and more present in library mission statements as scholarly activities are encouraged to bridge the gap between the scholars and the public.

African public libraries play an important role in community development. Greying and Zulu outline the monumental responsibility that these libraries have to preserve indigenous knowledge and folklore, produce creative work that increases engagement, disseminate knowledge throughout the community, and provide spaces for discussion. Unfortunately, however, in some African countries, it is the community libraries that are taking on a similar role in meeting the essential needs of the community. Mostert, outlining norms for community libraries, explains that these community libraries are managed through participative governance, are community funded, provide inclusive services, have self-determined membership, provide access to community-relevant information, provide collaborative interactions between users and librarians, and foster cooperative relationships between the library and community groups. The ultimate goals are for the library to be proactively inclusive, engaged with the needs and interest of the community. Similar, du Plessis expressed the need for the “retooling” of African libraries to take ownership and be active with information transfer and sharing of written and oral traditions based on African culture and values instead of relying on the passive Western model.

Documenting the impact of poetry in a community, although difficult to quantify, is very important to the poets, organizers, and audience that interacts in that space. The Library as Incubator Project is an organization that is facilitating and promoting poetry collections and collaborations between artists and libraries. The project highlights numerous writing and poetry collections and collaborations that are taking place in libraries across the nation and reveals that there are a few academic libraries organizing and supporting these endeavors. Sjollema and Hanley studied the qualitative impact of using poetry-writing groups in developing communities in Montreal, and although poetry is most often associated with therapy, the study reported the benefits of developing community action skills to maintain consistent participation, relationship building, and the writing and sharing of poetry. Ultimately, there were benefits to the creators and organizers in learning to write and develop social action agendas and challenges related to sustainability of the program.

An intriguing project among poets, zoos, and public libraries is documented in _The Language of Conservation_, as it chronicles the development and assessment of a model for a collaborative research project over three years. In the study, The Poets House in New York, the New York Wildlife Conservation Society, and a select group of public libraries forged partnerships to increase access to poetry by making connections with nature and by leveraging the common desire to preserve stories and make poetry more accessible to the public through book donations and learning events. The project was designed to bring together these entities from five cities to enhance spaces in nature with poetry and provide a space for discussion, appreciation, and discovery. Poems strategically placed within zoos imprinted and expanded the educational experiences of the public. The Poets House in New York was built in 1985 on the premise that poetry is to be shared, and it provides free access to a comprehensive open-stacks collection of poetry in addition to hosting and organizing poetry events and workshops. It is from the Poets House model that the African Poetry Book Fund Library was developed.
Based on a personal relationship, Dr. Kwame Dawes, editor of the *Prairie Schooner* and an English professor at UNL, approached two members of the library faculty, Lorna Dawes and Charlene Maxey-Harris, about his work in the African Poetry Book Fund and the establishment of the African Poetry Libraries project. The libraries were born out of a need to support the local poets in their writing: "The project was prompted by the observation by our editorial board that much of the poetry we were seeing in our contests and in the submissions for publication, revealed a distinctive lack of exposure of the writers to contemporary poetry." It is the hope that access to the work of contemporary poets will impact the writing of local poets that continues to energize this project. The goal of the partnership was to seek the expertise of the UNL library faculty to help with establishing the libraries, selecting suitable venues, consulting on the organization of the collection, and the training and management of the volunteers. A letter of memorandum with the *Prairie Schooner* was drafted, addressing scope, rationale, and responsibilities in the project, and the three-year pilot timeline was set. The UNL librarians consulted with the poets and volunteers to select suitable spaces, set up and manage the library collections, and plan events. The APBF Libraries Facebook page and website were set up and managed by the UNL librarians to facilitate communication between the African poetry libraries and to support and publicize the libraries’ activities and events.

In the letter of memorandum, the UNL librarians committed time for managing and administrating the collection through consultation, working with APBF to identify the libraries, and assisting with the promotion of the project. Most of the work by the librarians involved selecting appropriate locations, organizing the collection, defining the process for book preparation, and mailing the contents to the respective libraries. Additional time was spent simplifying and documenting the library management procedures in a manual for the volunteers to use. The librarians work with the *Prairie Schooner* during the summer months to prepare and process the shipment of books for delivery. After the initial delivery, the librarians make monthly efforts via email to obtain consistent feedback from the volunteers about their programs and events, giving them opportunities to discuss problems and issues pertaining to the setting up and management of the library. After three years, the letter of memorandum will be revisited to evaluate the libraries’ involvement and continued partnership. A change in the leadership of the *Prairie Schooner* will move the project elsewhere, but this will not sever the partnership that is already established among the UNL Libraries, APBF, and the African Poetry Libraries. If this occurs, the memorandum will be re-examined at that time and UNL librarians will continue to support the African Poetry Libraries. It is the intention of the librarians to establish connections with other academic libraries that would like to be involved in the project by adopting and supporting the poetry libraries as they become self-sufficient and are no longer officially supported by the APBF. This will ensure the viability of the poetry libraries and allow for continued UNL Libraries’ involvement in the project.

**Identifying Local African Partners and Selecting Library Locations**

The African Poetry Libraries are reading libraries that serve poets, lovers of poetry, and new audiences. They are located in public spaces that are run by teams of writers and art supporters. Identifying suitable local partners was imperative if the libraries were going to have...
an impact on the community and were going to remain and thrive after the initial support from the African Poetry Book Fund. The most efficient way of identifying poets willing to take on such responsibilities was through a combination of actively pursuing connections in specific countries and receiving inquiries from poet groups who had heard about the project through conferences and social media. Criteria for selecting the sites involved

- the identification of an individual willing to spearhead the establishment of the library in the country in question and willing to either staff the library themselves or find volunteers to do so;
- locating a venue that was open, secure, and accessible to everyone interested in using the facility and accessing the books and journals (the venue had to be capable of shelving up to 1,500 titles and include a space to allow for reading); and
- identifying a core of individuals and organizations on the ground willing to, and capable of, making the library sustainable for the long-term.

Partners were to be connected to the poetry groups in their area and have the capability to work with volunteers to maintain and manage the library collection. Five key regions in Africa were targeted, and poets with connections to APBF or the *Prairie Schooner* editor were contacted to see if they (or any other poets) would be interested in piloting a library. The response was encouraging, and five countries were selected. All libraries were located in established facilities: two in established libraries—Botswana and Ghana—and three in arts cultural centers—Uganda, The Gambia, and Kenya. These different locations have created an eclectic array of community libraries, all having unique advantages and challenges that have contributed to their success and impact.

![Figure 23.1. Botswana Library](image)

All libraries were spearheaded by renowned poets and academics. A published poet based in London and the Gambia, Kadija Sesay George, acquired the location arranging for the collection to be housed in an unused annex of the National Center of the Arts and Culture in the Greater Banjul area. The location was easily accessible with a spacious reading room, computer workspace, a small workshop/presentation area, and an outside grounds area that provides room for events and seating. Poet TJ Dema in Botswana made contacts and arranged with Keleapere Makgoeng, a public librarian at the Botswana Public Library, to host the Botswana library. Poet Beverley Nambozo Nsengiyunva in
Uganda collaborated with Fred Batale at the 32° Ugandan Arts Trust, and in Kenya, poets Michael Onsando and Clifton Gachagua were instrumental in setting up the library, first with Eliphas Nyamogo at the Goethe-Institut and then arranging for it to be moved to its final destination at Kwani Trust. In Ghana, Dr. Helen Yitah, a professor at the University of Ghana, made the necessary contacts and arrangements for the George Padmore Research Library in Accra to host the library, where Gheysika Agambila and volunteers from the Ghana Association of Writers manage the day to day operations of the library.

The Collections: US and International Publishers

Recognizing that many poets in Africa have limited access to contemporary poetry due to poor distribution and the high costs of books, the libraries are supplied by the African Poetry Book Fund through its partnership with various organizations around the US and the UK. Each year, the APBF sends approximately three hundred titles to each library. The books are new, and although an important part of the project’s goals is to build a list of African titles, the collections currently represent contemporary world poetry and are comprised of donations from more than thirty-six publishers, presses, foundations, and individuals. Books that are not donated directly from publishers arrive from the “review copies” stacks of partnering literary journals across the US. Books are distributed randomly to the libraries, taking into consideration special subject requests and cultural or religious concerns. All libraries are guaranteed books for the first three years, depending on their ability to accommodate the collection, and managers are encouraged to make connections with publishers in their region for additional donations. This initial partnership with the UNL libraries requires minimal monetary investment and is based on the global exchange of information and consultation and networking with scholarly communications departments and publishers. Personal donations of books have also been received, and in 2015, Elizabeth Alexander, chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, donated fifty copies of her new book, *The Light of the World*, to each library to be used as prizes and book club readings.

The Libraries: Administration and Programming

These libraries are managed by volunteers and poets who may not have any experience working with collections, so the UNL librarians made the decision for the libraries to be non-circulating collections during the first three years while they were in their infancy. This would ensure the security of the collection, allow the libraries to become established, and give the coordinators the time to find and train volunteers and work through any management issues before making any circulation loaning decisions. The UNL librarians work with the APBF and serve as library consultants and liaise with the libraries managers. They are available to answer questions pertaining to the management of day-to-day operations and serve as technical advisors and coordinators of the libraries. The librarians also work with the *Prairie Schooner* staff and student volunteers to organize the shipment
and distribution of the books. The donated books are received by the *Prairie Schooner* office, where they are cataloged, stamped with the library APBF logo, and packaged by student volunteers using instructions from the African Poetry Library Manual, a thirteen-page manual written by the UNL librarians. The manual provides directions for the receiving, unpacking, labeling, and shelving of the books in addition to containing instructions on how to set up the library, manage the daily operations, and search and print from the catalog. The books are cataloged before shipping in the APBF Libraries Union Catalog on *LibraryThing*, an open access catalog, that allows each library to view the collections in all the APBF Poetry Libraries and accommodates the cataloging of each library as a separate entity within the larger APBF collection.

The initial shipment of books was accompanied with a copy of the manual, publicity flyers and postcards, printed catalogs (author/title and alphabetical list), book spine labels, a visitor’s sign-in book and a records book. To help with the setting up of the libraries, the manual also contained suggestions on how to arrange the library space, publicize the library, and how to manage the daily workflow. The librarians thought it was important to encourage the libraries to keep records and numbers of their daily activities and event participants; they included a records book in their shipment for this purpose. Periodically and at the end of each year, the libraries are required to submit a report to the APBF before the new shipment is sent off. This ensures that the libraries are still operational and allows the librarians to deal with any lingering issues before new books are shipped.

**Programs and Events**

The libraries all hosted extensive launch events, inviting local poets, academics, and government officials involved in the arts to participate and attend the events. After the first two years, there is evidence of the development of established programs and events at each location. It is obvious that the most valuable indicator of library success and impact is the presence and vitality of an established community of poets in the area.

The library in The Gambia provides an example of this success. The African Homecomer’s Collective, a community poets group, provides the volunteers for staffing the library and together with SABLE Litmag have taken responsibility and ownership of the collection. The commitment of these volunteers to their poets group and the magazine has been the main impetus of this library’s vibrancy. The Gambia library hosted opening events that spanned the weekend with seventy-five people attending, engaging adults, youths, and children in open-mic performances, workshops, and poetry readings. In the last two years, the library collection has been used to support several poetry workshops for local schools and is used extensively by a new poetry group, The Cloud, that now organizes regular poetry events in the library. The volunteers in this library continue to organize poetry readings and competitions and are very proactive as they endeavor to make new connections with other local groups of poets. The library has begun an outreach to the schools that involves hosting several workshops and has now requested more children’s books to support this endeavor. Poet Kadija Sesay George was very instrumental in making this library visible. Her involvement with poets in The Gambia is remarkable.

“The dream that the library will be a focal point, where young poets can develop their writing but also exchange ideas about how the Gambian people can get access to poetry, through books and readings” is her goal for The Gambia Poetry Library as she continues to publicize and garner support for poets and the library, *Ping*.
At the launch of the Botswana Public Library, the site manager and public librarian, Keleapere Makogoeng, engaged primary school children in some creative writing workshops. These initial connections with the community were extremely effective in gaining support for the libraries and increasing usage. This opening event was attended by representatives from the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture in addition to officials from the Botswana National Library Services and celebrated the poetry library and shared a vision of celebrating the spoken word through workshops for youth. In her keynote speech, poet TJ Dema announced that the existence of the poetry books was in line with the Botswana National Library Policy of 2013, and emphasized that the purpose of the collection was to “foster growth of a knowledge society through facilitating access to relevant, current and good quality information that supports lifelong learning and enhance the quality of life for all.”

The advantage of having the libraries adopted by established poetry groups is also evident in the caliber of the events at the Uganda library. In September 2014, the launch event was scheduled to be a part of the 32° Ugandan Arts Trust regional festival, and this allowed the event to feature the short-listed poets from the prestigious Babishai Niwe Poetry Awards in addition to the members of Uganda Women Writers Association, Makerere University Literature Students, and Kampala’s Poetry In Session members. The Babishai Niwe Poetry Foundation also donated books to the library and committed to organize at least two readings a year. In addition to providing spaces for poets to gather and learn, the presence of these dedicated libraries has propelled critical conversations around poetry and its place in the society.

The Kenyan library launch at the Goethe-Institut, in addition to an eclectic selection of poetry readings and performances, hosted a panel discussion that explored the importance of libraries in the evolution of the poet and the negative impact of Kenyan educational and political systems on the production and publication of Kenyan poetry anthologies. Due to the generosity and commitment of Eliphas Nyamogo, the head of Information and Library Department at the Goethe-Institut, the Kenya library was housed at this location temporarily for one year and in June 2017, returned to its permanent home at Kwani Trust, now managed by Angela Wachuka and the new director, Velma Koome.

The Ghanaian Library is located in the George Padmore Research Library on African Affairs and is a part of the public library system. It is managed by the library staff and the Ghana Association of Writers volunteers but is the least active of all the poetry libraries. This may be due to the research nature of this special library that may not be highly used by poets and writers. The UNL librarians will continue to focus on this library after the initial three-year commitment, to explore ways to make this collection more accessible and beneficial to the local poets and writers.

The Future: Challenges, Opportunities, and Sustainability

In only three years, there is evidence that the African Poetry Libraries have been successful in hosting an eclectic assortment of events, actively supporting the community, and gaining the involvement of local poets, committed volunteers, and the library staff. The communities have taken ownership and created libraries that are unique to their cultures.
and cities. The most successful libraries have dedicated local poets and volunteer staff that organize events and manage the collection, facilitate the creation of new poetry groups, and support established writer’s groups in the community. They have hosted poetry workshops in the schools, poetry competitions, scholarly discussions, and open-mic readings for children and adults, making new connections and establishing networks among poets, academics, and the community.

As the number of libraries increase and the first libraries are released from the initial three-year APBF support, other academic libraries, publishers, or literary organizations in the US and UK will be approached to adopt these libraries, to continue helping and advising the managers, and use their own networks to solicit and bolster the existing poetry collections. The partnership with *Prairie Schooner*, APBF and UNL Libraries will continue as new libraries are planted and these already-established libraries advise and help new libraries in other parts of the continent. The APBF is currently working on requests from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and South Africa for the next round of libraries that will be launched in 2018. In 2016, APFB received an Honorable mention in the National Book Foundation Innovators Award, and there is no doubt that this type of publicity will generate more support and publisher donations to the libraries.

One major challenge centers around issues related to space limitations and the need to find more public and accessible spaces to house the libraries. To date, volunteers have been very successful negotiating for such spaces, and this is important if the libraries are to be sustainable. The availability of such buildings with adequate space and suitable facilities may be difficult in other countries and so may require financial support in the future. The acquisition of permanent locations is important, but because these spaces need to be free and accessible to the public, this poses additional challenges that need to be addressed.

Recruiting and managing volunteers to work with a permanent collection can be very difficult. When poets or individuals partner to open a library, they commit to finding and managing volunteers, and the hours of operation and sustainability of the library is predicated on the availability of these volunteers. The recruitment, retention, and training require time and commitment that can be extremely challenging. When libraries are set up in already-established spaces—i.e., libraries and community centers—the volunteers assist the center staff, resulting in more structure in the management and more regular opening and closing hours; however, the volunteers may lack the autonomy they need to plan innovative events and have access to the collection after work hours. On the other hand, when volunteers alone manage libraries, regular hours may be difficult, but this independence may allow for more unconventional events and more community involvement. Finding a balance between the two organizational models is difficult to achieve.

The manual has been extremely helpful to the volunteers as they set up, organize, and manage the collections. The decision to catalog and process the books before shipping proved to be welcome and very successful and ensured a consistency in the catalog that would have been very difficult to achieve with the volunteer staff model that is at the core of these libraries. Although the libraries are initially set up as reading rooms only, after the first three years, each library will make its own decision on circulation policies. The UNL librarians determined this to be the best approach in order to give the libraries time to become established and to give the collection the opportunity to expand to a substantial size before opening the collection up for circulation. All of the libraries are encouraged to develop their own acquisition network, and it is the hope, especially if they are
adopted by other academic organizations, that they will continue to add to their collection, acquiring donations from local African publishers and writers. The UNL librarians will be committed to consulting with these libraries as they develop and grow, working with them to select lending models and develop policies that are suitable for their unique library community. The libraries, once established, will be autonomous.

Communication with the libraries can be difficult. Although email is used, the internet access in some of the libraries can be expensive or absent, and this, together with time zone differences, can impede communication. Skype and Facebook messaging proved to be helpful to all but one of the libraries, although all the libraries mentioned their need to use social media more effectively to communicate and publicize events to the community. This is something that can be addressed by APBF and the UNL librarians through regular internal e-newsletters to all the libraries, which would include news and happenings from each site and other information to encourage a sense of community between the library managers and volunteers. A community cloud-sharing space would also be a welcome addition and would allow sites to upload images and videos more easily.

Gaining Support

These libraries are dependent on philanthropic donations and community support, and integral to their success is their ability to solicit and retain this support by demonstrating the impact they have on the community and the value they bring to the literary arts. Libraries have traditionally struggled with evaluation measures and have moved from internal measurements that support the strength of their collections to outward performance indicators that support the strength of their services to the community. The Free Library of Philadelphia implements a pallet of tools and strategies to evaluate and communicate its impact in the city, some of which are relevant and could be very effective in the African Poetry libraries. Closter suggests connecting programs with larger societal literacy issues and articulating these clearly in the library strategic plan as an avenue for communicating value and soliciting funding. As the UNL librarians continue to mentor the library managers, a more purposeful approach to evaluation will be taken to try to help the managers measure and document their impact based on their goals and the needs of the communities they serve. It will be important to spend some time with each library manager developing one or two achievable goals that they can focus on during each year. They may also coordinate with academic libraries sponsors to communicate with APBF and possibly organize the digital scholarship of the poets. University presses and libraries can host symposia for the poets to increase visibility for the projects.

What makes the African Poetry Book Libraries unique is the poetry community. It’s a poet’s library that inspires the written and spoken word in a specialized community library. Opportunities for sustainability lie in the creative outputs, awards, and partnerships with other academic institutes to share avenues for publishing and support for literary awards. For the future, there is a desire to collect non-English titles, understanding that such spaces that support print and oral traditions encourage the development of a reading culture and indigenous knowledge. International library organizations, such as International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), are in place so that librarians can work together to meet the national library policies and initiatives as noted by the Botswana library organizer. These libraries are determined to meet the cultural needs of the community and not only incorporate the Western values or traditions.
Academic libraries as a collaborative partner gently wraps around the African libraries’ needs and provides a structure and collection based on the literary partners. In many ways, academic libraries can build bridges between poets, reading culture, scholarly networks, African librarians, and information specialists. Agyemang draws attention to the struggle and survival of community libraries in Ghana. These African libraries, now supported, may continue to develop and connect with larger public libraries or cultural arts networks for survival.

The goal of this project was not only to create dynamic resources centers but to create sustainable physical and virtual spaces to inspire poets and encourage the writing of poetry. The path to establishing a sustainable collection will not be complete in three years, so the partnership will continue, and future directions for this project will entail the continued consultant support for the management of the collections, enhancing the accessibility of open education resources for the arts and the planting of new libraries in other parts of the continent. The APBF will attempt to investigate how the poetry libraries impact the African poets’ scholarship and publishing record, as this was one of the initial goals of the project. Academic libraries can play a vital role by first aligning strategic goals with campus entities and global efforts that enhance teaching and learning, and by actively promoting and contributing their expertise to non-academic libraries of this nature.

This case study highlights strong partnerships between a literary magazine, a faculty initiative, and an academic library that has shaped a global connection of outreach to African communities by linking them to scholarly, community, and literary exchanges fulfilling the values of the university community.

Notes
1. The African Poetry Book Fund, the brainchild of founding editor and director Dr. Kwame Dawes, promotes and advances the development and publication of the poetic arts through its book series, contests, workshops, and seminars, and through its collaborations with publishers, festivals, booking agents, colleges, universities, conferences and all other entities that share an interest in the poetic arts of Africa.
9. Ibid., 64.
11. Ibid., 16.
22. Ibid.

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