Analysis of activism as an impetus for setting up public libraries in Kenya

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ABSTRACT : *Community leaders are not focused on the literacy skills of the people they lead. It can be construed that the higher the rate of a community's illiteracy, the more difficult it is for the community to develop. A look at Kenya shows that well equipped libraries for various constituencies is abysmal. Libraries can accelerate knowledge acquisition by the public through distance education. The study uses analytic methodology to critique lack of public libraries in Kenya. Analysis of community illiteracy rate reveals that the problem can better be addressed by community members playing the part of activists. Since activism is allowed in Kenya Constitution 2010, it becomes the only recourse to impel members of parliament and county assemblies to accelerate the setting up libraries in their areas of their jurisdiction and in this regard, activism is vital for social change. This study recommends more research to be carried out in Kenya on the need for and setting up more libraries for the citizens.*

KEY WORDS: activism, community library, national library, public library

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on public libraries that can be set up from the tax payer's money through the initiatives of their leaders, especially members of parliament and county assemblies. It does not deal with institutional, departmental, community, scientific and other types of libraries. It first provides a background of the libraries from ancient times up to the present. Secondly, it states specifically what the problem is in Kenya. Thirdly, after sating the problem, relevant literature is reviewed. Analysis and discussion form the fourth part of the paper and then a conclusion is lastly made.

The paper is based on critical theory as propounded by Frankfurt School of Germany during 1930s (Mautner, 2005). The theory critiques situations in which public libraries are lacking in Kenya with a view to advocating for the existence of the libraries. Analysis is a second order methodology. It analyses issues in order to come up with a solution. . The solution suggests employing activism to compel members of parliament and county assemblies in Kenya to establish libraries for the people they politically represent.

Background information

The word "library" is derived from Latin *liber* meaning book. Throughout world history, leaders have been concerned with the education of their subjects and had set up libraries for this purpose. Probably the first library was established by Pharaoh Amenhotep III during 13th century BCE in Egypt at the Temple of Waset, the first world university (Nantambu,nd). The university was also known as the Grand Lodge or Thebes or Luxor or Septer and it was built around 14th century BCE. Another significant development in the establishment of library for purposes of education was witnessed in Assyria (Fincke, 2014). The Assyrian leader, Ashurbanipal, established a well-organised library for his subjects in Nineveh in 7th century BCE. Some authorities regard Ashurbanipal's library as the first one in the world but it is appropriate to posit that the Temple of Waset had a library in 13th century BCE. Ashurbanipal's library contained over 30,000 clay tablets from which the citizens could be educated. Also in Egypt, Ptolemy II built a library at Alexandria in about 3rd century BCE. The Egyptian Alexandrian library had over 700,000 documents from which people read and got educated. These libraries promoted education. Many of the revered intellectuals of the past like Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle learnt at the library at the Temple of Waset.

Libraries have been evolving since ancient times. Of recent past, Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan (1892-1972) is considered as the father of library science (The history of libraries, nd). For digital library, Michael Stern Hart who was born in 1943 is regarded as the founder of digital library (https://history-compter.com, Candela, Castelli and Pagano, 2011). With digital library, a lot of information could be accessed easily. Despite easy accessibility to library information occasioned by the advent of the internet, people still need physical libraries in their places of residence for accessing information and this is exemplified in many parts of the world.

The British and American libraries are big and contain many items. For example, the British library contains 170 million items. Kenya has 65 public libraries with a collection of about two million items. Over half of the counties in Kenya do not have public libraries and community libraries which are sponsored by NGOs are very few and scattered. The focus of this paper is public library which is established from tax payer's money. Public library is well placed to educate and inform the public at minimal cost. Although community libraries which are established by philanthropic organisations can help the public, they are not run by citizens' taxes. Kenya National Service Board

Cap 225 of 1965 and Kenya National Library Service Act of 2020 support the establishment of public libraries.

Statement of the problem
Libraries are not sufficient for Kenyan population since there are only 65 public libraries against a population of 54,000,000 people and this translates to one public library per 843,750 persons. Leaders are supposed to promote education and education can best be promoted when there is provision of a suitable reading environment in the form of a library. What can be done to propel members of parliament and county assemblies in Kenya to lead in setting up libraries and information centres in constituencies and wards, respectively? Since activism is supported by Kenya Constitution 2010, it might be the best recourse to take to impel leaders to institute library and information centres in their respective areas of jurisdiction. The paper uses critical analytic methodology to critique lack of community libraries in Kenya.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Ancient libraries like those of Egypt, Assyria focused on informing the populace so that they could know their rights and respond appropriately to the calls of their leaders. This is significant in human progress. As noted by Somin (2013), if citizens are ignorant, they cannot hold leaders accountable. Leaders in ancient times provided libraries for their citizens. What can be discerned from the ancient leadership style is that leaders were visionary and could set up public libraries to enlighten their subjects. Pharaohs of Egypt were visionary leaders who build libraries without being forced by their subjects as attested by the Bible. There was high respect and revolt to a leader in terms of demonstrations and protests were probably not there. When Moses was called by God to rescue the Israelites from Egypt, he was hesitant because pharaoh was a very powerful person on earth who could not be confronted by any person (Exodus 3: 1-22).

During the Medieval period (1000-1500), monastic libraries known as *scriptorium*, which are still beneficial, sprung up. These libraries assisted monks in their studies and prayers. A notable intellectual development in intellectualism emerged from monastic libraries in the 19th century where Gregor Johann Mendel (1822-1884) bred different flowers resulting in different varieties thus ushering genetic engineering. Mendel was a monk and he is regarded as the father of genetics. It was an initiative of the Church leaders to set up these libraries without being forced by the Church-goers.

Leaders in many parts of the world realised the importance of library to their citizens.In Great Britain, many public libraries were established. Chetham's Public Library in Manchester was established in 1653. Its main purpose was to inform and educate the Britons. In 1973, British Library came into being through British Library Act. It is the largest library in the world with over 170 million items and an annual budget of Ksh 20 billion. It is the centre of UK information

network responsible for researches in science, technology, business and humanities. The Britons are updated on scientific and technological advancements, including other information through this library. There are also over 5,000 libraries in UK. The current population of UK is about 68 million.

In US, there is the Library of Congress which is the second biggest in the world with annual budget of about Ksh 90 billion. US has over 117,000 libraries against a population of 332 million by 2022. This translates to one library for 3000 people. These libraries educate and inform the citizens. The public libraries are put up by public funds. Other countries like Russia and India have very many libraries. Russia has 46,000 public libraries against a population of 147.2 million according to 2021 census and this translates to one library for 3,000 people. India has 29,800 libraries against the current population of 1.4 billion and this translates to one library for 47,000 people.

In Africa, the current biggest library is Balme, within the University of Ghana campus but some attribute the largest library in Africa to be that of the University of Dar es Salaam. Balme was established in 1948 and it has over 400,000 books. It is efficiently managed with good electronic databases that serve the University clientele. Other libraries in Africa include CL Mairais Library and Sandton Library in South Africa, St Catherine's Monastery Library in Egypt and Keren Public Library in Eritrea.

In Kenya there is one National Library and 64 public libraries. National Library is in Nairobi and the 64 public libraries are scattered all over the country in different counties as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Public Libraries in Kenyan against the Counties+

SN	County	No. of Libraries	Area Situated
1	Baringo	3	Kabarnet, Meisori, Eldama Ravine
2	Bomet	1	Silibwet
3	Bungoma	1	Kimilili
4	Busia	None	
5	Elgeyo Marakwet	1	Lagam
6	Embu	1	Embu
7	Garissa	3	Garissa, Mbalambala, Masalani
8	Homa Bay	None	
9	Isiolo	1	Isiolo
10	Kajiado	None	
11	Kakamega	2	Kakamega, Lusumu
12	Kericho	1	Kericho

13	Kiambu	1	Thika
14	Kilifi	3	Kilifi, Dzitsoni, Malindi
15	Kirinyaga	None	
16	Kisii	1	Kisii
17	Kisumu	2	Kisumu, Koru (Dr Robert Ouko Memorial Library)
18	Kitui	1	Mwingi
19	Kwale	1	Kwale (Ukunda)
20	Laikipia	2	Nanyuki, Rumuruti
21	Lamu	None	
22	Machakos	1	Athi River (Elimika Resource Centre)
23	Makueni	3	Mutyambua, Kinyambu, Kithasyu
24	Mandera	1	Mandera
25	Marsabit	1	Moyale
26	Meru	4	Meru, Mikumbune, Timau, Gatimbi
27	Migori	1	Awendo
28	Mombasa	1	Mombasa
29	Murang'a	2	Murang'a, Kangema
30	Nairobi	3	Nairobi Area, Buruburu, Kibera
31	Nakuru	3	Nakuru, Naivasha, Gilgil
32	Nandi	1	Kapsabet
33	Narok	2	Narok, Lelechonik
34	Nyamira	None	
35	Nyandarua	1	Ol Kalou
36	Nyeri	4	Nyeri, Munyu, Chinga, Karatina
37	Samburu	None	
38	Siaya	3	Nyilima, Rambula, Ukwala
39	Taita Taveta	3	Wundanyi, Voi, Werugha (Mary Patch Turnbull memorial Library
40	Tana River	None	
41	Tharaka Nithi	None	
42	Trans Nzoia	None	
43	Turkana	None	
44	Uasin Gishu	1	Eldoret
45	Vihigi	None	
46	Wajir	5	Wajir, Griftu, Habasweni, Tarbai, Bute
47	West Pokot	None	
	TOTAL	65	

Source : Wikipedia

From table 1 above, there are 47 counties with 65 libraries. One county (2.1%) has five public libraries; two counties (4.3%) have four public libraries each; eight counties (17%) have three libraries each; five counties (10.6%) have two public libraries each; 18 counties (38.3%) have one public library each, and 13 counties (27.7%) do not have public libraries. Over a quarter of the counties in Kenya do not have public libraries. Do leaders think of setting up public libraries? What does the law say about setting up of public libraries?

Kenya National Library Service Act (2020) part 5 (d) encourages "research in the development of libraries and related services" and part 5 (e) focuses on promotion of "reading for knowledge, information and enjoyment through the stimulation of public interest in books and participation in campaigns for the eradication of illiteracy."

Prior to 2020, library activities in Kenya were guided by Kenya National Library Service Board Cap 225 of 1965. The chapter also encourages the establishment of libraries and promotion of a reading culture to enable the citizens to be informed. From 1965 to-date, there is no legal lacuna in setting up public libraries in Kenya. What if the law is not adhered to and no elected leader thinks of setting up a public library?

The Constitution of Kenya (2010), Chapter Four: The Bill of Rights, Section 37 states:
"Every person has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket, and to present petitions to public authorities."

This section of the Constitution allows for activism in Kenya. As defined by Oxford Dictionary, activism is action using vigorous campaign to effect change. An activist is one who champions change. They can be members of trade unions, political organisations or lobby groups. Online Etymology Dictionary says that activism started in 1915 when Swedish activists petitioned Sweden's neutrality in World War I. Activists protest and demonstrate. After briefly reviewing relevant literature, it suffices to do some analysis and discussion.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From ancient times, leaders built libraries for their subjects for the enhancement of knowledge and understanding. There were no demonstrations or any sort of activism to compel leaders to build libraries. This is evident in pharaonic, Assyrian and Medieval civilisations. In modern civilization, European countries and US, for instance, put a lot of funds in the development of libraries so that researches are effectively done. There is no coercion by the general populace to the governments of these countries to build the libraries. It is a civil responsibility for leaders to act in the interest of the people without any coercion.

If Russia is taken as an example of a European country, it is evident that library is an important institution for human progress because there is one library for 3000 people. When scientific and technological advancement of Russia is taken into account, it is realized that Russia is more advanced than US which is currently considered as the world superpower. US Vice Chief of Space Gen. David Thompson said: "We are not as advanced as the Chinese or Russians in terms of hypersonic programmes" (Ani, 2021). Hypersonic programmes deal with missiles that move at a speed which is more than five times that of sound. Historically, it is Russia which launched the first world satellite, *Sputnik*, into space and this happened in 1957. This attests to the fact that libraries are important for human advancement and it can be construed that any leader who is not thinking about the development of libraries is not development conscious. It is not farfetched to attribute the scientific advancement of Russia to libraries. In libraries, people learn on their own and then become innovate and creative, just as Gregor Mendel learnt on his own in a monastic library and emerged a geneticist.

In Kenya there are 65 public libraries against a population of about 54 million, which means one library is for 831,000 people. Why do members of parliament and county assemblies claim to be promoters of education if developing libraries is not their focus? How can such leaders stimulate reading and research to eradicate illiteracy?

Members of parliament and county assemblies are directly responsible for promoting education but there is ineptitude on their part to do so. The most viable option which is legal is to organise demonstrations at constituency and ward levels to demand the establishment of libraries. It is the responsibility of the community to demand their rights. The drafters of Kenya Constitution (2010) envisaged in their wisdom that leaders may fail to work in the interest of the led and it is the duty of the people to organise themselves and compel leaders to take action.

Take, for example, Homa Bay County with a population of over 1 million according to 2019 census and 40 county assembly wards without a single public library since independence in 1963. How can leaders in that region claim to be promoters of education? Do such leaders participate in campaigns to stimulate the reading culture and to eradicate illiteracy? Are these leaders genuine when they stand on platforms and say their **first priority is education**?

It would be quite appropriate for a member of parliament or the county assembly to join their community at a resource centre where interaction and exchange of ideas can take place. If a member of county assembly has a library in their ward, they could guide the members on the literacy skills required to fill government forms like downloading them from the internet. A ward library or resource centre could act as *huduma centre,* which provides varies services in the country. It is posited that the manner in which elected leaders handle the issues pertaining to knowledge can positively influence the community on education far much better than organising fund raising for education. It is also far more important than making a lot of speeches on education.

Suppose a member of the county assembly is seen in a library centre reading some materials, it is construed that that will have a positive impact on school going children. The children will internalize in their minds that reading is important and this can eradicate illiteracy, just the way it is contained in Kenya National Library Service Act 2020.

When leaders do not promote reading culture, it can likely be interpreted that they want ignorant people so that they can continue leading without interruption and such leaders are a drawback to development. Leaders need to take into account that when the community they lead is enlightened their work as leaders becomes easy. They would not take a lot of time explaining to the community how to vote, how to incorporate new techniques in farming, how to start income generating project and how to prevent diseases.

In analysing the role of activism, it is evident that it can definitely effect change where leaders are inept. Activism has resulted in elimination of gender stereotypes, marginalisation, and changes in oppressive laws, among very many other things. Activism is not hate or an indictment to anybody but it is a civilised call for action where someone responsible might have failed to act due to human weakness and should be taken positively. Kenyan independence was achieved through the application of activism. Sometimes activists are not considered in a positive light by those in power but this is the nature of human beings. What is important is the message which is put across and this is why constitutions of varies countries in the world provide for the place of opposition parties.

CONCLUSION

Members of parliament and county assemblies in Kenya are responsible for legislation and initiating development projects in their areas. They have responsibility of directing where public libraries are to be set up and they are better placed to lobby for funding. As representatives of the people they can only be regarded as education conscious leaders when they put efforts in the establishment of public libraries in their jurisdictions. Library is the best place to demonstrate commitment to intellectualism. Through internet services, libraries can help people to learn and acquire knowledge.

Since the leaders are inept in setting up libraries as authenticated by the above analysis, this paper calls for civil activism as an impetus to make members of parliament and county assemblies in Kenya set up public libraries to educate, inform and entertain citizens of Kenya. This activism is supported by Chapter Four of Kenya Constitution (2010). The mantra should be: "It is fallacious for leaders to talk of promoting education if they cannot promote the establishment of decent libraries."

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