

Christianity and rural community literacy practices in Uganda

George Ladaah Openjuru

Makerere University

Elda Lyster

University of KwaZulu-Natal

In this article, we examine how Christianity provides the impetus for local literacy practices in a rural community in Uganda. These Christian literacy practices form a central part of the literacy activities of the community and are manifested in a variety of contexts from public to private, using a wide variety of readily available religious texts in the community. Through examination of Christian literacy practices, the authors suggest that ethnographic research has the potential to generate information that can be used to enhance literacy learning in rural community life.

This article is based on a wider ethnographic study¹ of local literacy practices in Bweyale, a rural community in Uganda. The general aim of the larger study was to understand, recognise and give value to how rural people use literacy in their everyday lives, to identify the most prominent literacy domains in rural community life and make recommendations as to how understanding of local literacy practices can contribute to more meaningful adult literacy programmes for rural people. The wider study revealed that one of the main areas in which literacy use features prominently in rural community life is in Christian religious practices. Unlike literacy practices in other significant areas such as education and commerce, religious literacy practices are often overlooked, possibly because they do not relate directly to national development concerns and can also be negatively associated with colonialism and evangelism.

As a result of national development concerns, adult literacy programmes for rural communities in Uganda, as in most African countries, have tended to focus on economic activities in areas such as agriculture, general household and community livelihoods and on more general development outcomes such as improved health (see Carr-Hill et al., 2001; Fiedrich & Jellema, 2003; Oxenham, Diallo, Katahoire, Mwangi & Sall, 2001; Wagner, 1995). In spite of some important studies revealing the influence of Christianity on rural literacy practices (Kulick & Stroud, 1993; Probst, 1993), religious literacy practices are not generally regarded as significant in informing adult literacy education curricula for rural people. This study confirms that the Christian religion provides the impetus for many literacy activities that occur in rural communities like Bweyale. A detailed examination of religious literacy practices not only adds to our theoretical

understanding of literacy but also has the potential to contribute new ideas to literacy programme development and intervention through ethnographic approaches that take into account the cultural concerns of the people learning reading and writing (see Papen, 2005b; Street, 1993, 2001).

The social practice view of literacy

This study was informed by the social practice theory of literacy, which posits that literacy is a social practice that is best understood in the social contexts and institutional practices within which it is used because it is socially constructed in particular discourses, social relationships and institutions. This theory de-emphasises the concept of literacy as an individual skill (see Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Papen, 2005a; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1984, 1995, 2000). Literacy in this case is seen as a community resource which can be used in a network of social support to benefit its members (Barton, 1994; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996). Theorists in this field have attempted to apply this theory to both adult and school literacy education (Papen, 2001, 2005a; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson & Soler, 2000, 2002).

The social practice theory of literacy has developed from a number of ethnographic studies conducted in Britain, the United States, Africa and Iran (see Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). More recent studies in Africa were conducted in South Africa (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996) and in Namibia (Papen, 2001). Studies with a specific focus on religion and literacy practices within a particular community include those conducted in Papua New Guinea by Kulick and Stroud (1993) and in Western Nigeria by Probst (1993). Kulick and Stroud (1993) noted that the community 'took hold' of literacy and transformed it to express their local Christian lives and needs based on their local social institutions and cultural concerns. In West Africa, Probst (1993) examined how literacy was perceived and experienced by the Yoruba people, and how these perceptions and experiences of literacy were shaped by the indigenous spiritual life of the Yoruba. In that way, literacy became a very important aspect of religious life among the Aladura believers. It is this syncretism of literacy and traditional forms and values that made literacy an acceptable aspect of worship in the Aladura church (Probst, 1993). In her Namibian study, Papen (2005b) showed how learners participating in the National Literacy Programme for Namibia (NLPN) changed the programme to meet their demands for religious literacy practices by bringing the discourse of the church and religion into the programme. This shows the strong impetus that religion can provide to learn and use literacy (Papen, 2005b).

Bweyale: the context of this study

The context of this study is the community of Bweyale, a small village in Uganda. Context in this study is understood as encompassing 'institutional structures, social relationships, economic conditions, historical processes and the ideological formations or discourses in which literacy is embedded' (Papen, 2001, p. 40). The concept of community is taken to mean a group of people living in one geographical location with shared institutions, natural and social resources, values and virtues and significant social interactions between its members. It includes social, political and economic space within

which individuals enact their social relationships in the process of sharing the available community resources (Wint, 2002).

Bweyale is located in Masindi district of Western Uganda. It is the most populated village of Kiryadongo Sub County, which has a population of 95,010 (Rwabwoogo, 2005). The population of Bweyale can roughly be estimated at 40,000 people although official figures are not available at the village level. It can be assumed that the proportion of the population of Bweyale that is Christian is comparable to the national figure of 80% with 45% of these being Catholic, 35% Anglican and 20% other Christian groups such as Seventh Day Adventist.

Bweyale is inhabited by people of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The largest ethnic group is the Luos (consisting of the Acholi, Alur, Langi and Palwo, all of whom speak dialects of Luo) followed by the Bantu language speaking ethnic groups (consisting of the Banyoro, Banyarwanda and Baruli) and the Sudanic language speaking ethnic groups (consisting of Lugwara and Madi). Luo is the most predominant spoken language in Bweyale and Kiswahili is the lingua franca popularly used for oral communication in trade and other interactions between speakers of different languages. English, the official language of Uganda and the most dominant language of literacy, is used for official, formal and other communication that is considered important. This gives it both power and status in Uganda (Nsibambi, 2000b; Sentumbwe, 2002).

Bweyale, built on both sides of the main road linking northern Uganda with Kampala in the south, consists of a trading centre which has an open air market, flat iron-roof brick and cement shop buildings and a surrounding village of largely round, grass-thatched huts. The main economic activities in Bweyale are subsistence farming and the sale of surplus crops to buy other life necessities like clothes, soap, salt, radios, bicycles and spare parts from the trading centre. On the main road passing through the trading centre, people sell roasted meat, maize, cassava and homemade pancakes to travellers using the Gulu–Kampala main road. There are a few government workers such as local government officials, police, primary school teachers and local NGO development workers.

The history of Christianity and literacy in Uganda

Reading and writing were first used in Uganda by Arab traders from around 1844. Although the Arabs were the first to introduce written information (texts) in Uganda, they did not make any effort to teach reading and writing in Arabic outside the practice of the Islamic faith (Ssekamwa, 2000). Literacy in the Roman alphabet was introduced into Uganda by Christian missionaries in the late 19th century. The first to arrive were the Anglican Church Missionary Society from England in 1877, followed by the Catholic White Fathers' Society from France in 1879. Both groups came with a mission to 'civilise', using religion and education. Literacy was therefore initially introduced into Uganda as an integral part of Christian religious practices, making Christianity the first social and institutional framework within which literacy found meaningful use in everyday life in Uganda. By embracing the Christian faith, the local people embraced a literate culture involving the use of the Bible, prayer books, hymn books and other religious texts (Byakutaga & Musinguzi, 2000; Onono-Onweng, Holmes & Lumumba, 2004; Ssekamwa, 2000).

Wherever the missionaries went, their first task was to learn the local languages, develop orthographies for that particular language, and translate and print Bibles, prayer books and

hymn books in that language. The missionaries emphasised the use of local languages in their literacy work, which gave local languages status and acceptability within church practices. Initially literacy was taught directly in relation to Christian instruction and the preparation of new converts (Byakutaga & Musinguzi, 2000; Parry, 2000b). New converts, in the Anglican Church in particular, were inducted into the Christian faith through reading and writing biblical texts. Becoming a Christian often became closely associated with becoming literate. The Anglicans emphasised reading of the Bible by individuals themselves. Therefore, before the establishment of schools, reading was taught as a precondition for becoming an Anglican Christian. The Catholics on the other hand emphasised rote learning of prayers and religious doctrines printed in other Catholic literature and did not require learning how to read and write as a precondition, although they also conducted some literacy classes (see Byakutaga & Musinguzi, 2000; Parry, 2000a).

As the Catholic catechism emphasises recitation, the material that is recited is read from books and made available to the catechumens orally (Byakutaga & Musinguzi, 2000). This practice introduces two types of literacy practices. Firstly, written material can be accessed through other people (literacy mediators according to the social practice theory of literacy [see Parry, 2000a]); secondly, book content can be memorised and recited orally. These literacy practices, in addition to routine use of the same texts, encouraged Catholics to learn most of their prayers by heart and recite them during their Sunday service without further reference to the prayer books, as we shall discuss later in this paper. These differences in emphasis on individual literacy have contributed to differences in literacy levels between Catholics and Anglicans, as Okech (2004, p. 184) notes: 'The Protestant approach promoted better acquisition of literacy among their followers than the Catholic one'.

Because of their historical and doctrinal differences, the two main missionary groups did not cooperate on common issues but instead often rivalled each other (Ssekamwa, 2000). For example, they sometimes developed two different orthographies for the same language, which led to variation in the spelling and pronunciation of some words in the same language. For example, in the Acholi dialect of the Luo language, the word for the concept of one supreme God (which was introduced by the missionaries) is spelt and pronounced as *Rubanga* for Catholics and *Lubanga* for Anglicans; and a Christian is *Lacristo* for Catholics and *Lacristayo* for Anglicans. These different spelling and pronunciation systems later became marks of identity and differentiation between Catholics and Anglicans (see Kalema, 2001; Onono-Onweng, Holmes & Lumumba, 2004; Ssekamwa, 2000).

After the introduction of formal school education by the missionaries in the 1890s, the teaching of literacy was no longer directly linked to religious instruction. Many of the differences between the Catholic and Anglican approaches to literacy were reduced because all the schools used the same approach to teach reading and writing. This shifting of literacy teaching to schools resulted in the dominance of school literacy and English as the language of literacy outside of church practices (see Ssekamwa, 2000). English was and has continued to be the language of instruction in Uganda after the first 3 years of initial education (from Primary Four [P. 4] to University (Government of Uganda, 1992; Nsibambi, 2000a).

The ethnographic research process

The study of literacy as a social practice demands the use of ethnographic methods, which are 'forms of social research having . . . a strong emphasis on exploring the nature

of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them' (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 248). In this study, this involved in-depth interviews, participant observation, collection of literacy artefacts and visual ethnography and documentary photography to provide visual data (see Bryman, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Erben, 1998; Harper, 1994; Smith, 1994). The selection of respondents and events for observations was made with a view to having as many important aspects of community life included in the study as possible. However, 'representativeness' (Bryman, 2001, p. 309) was not the guiding principle in this selection.

Bweyale was selected for this study because it is a rural, largely Luo community, which is a culture and language very familiar to the first author. The study population consisted of people living in Bweyale village and involved in its day-to-day life.

The theoretical sampling procedure in grounded theory was used to collect and analyse data and develop categories from the data. The main categories consisted of literacy related to religion, education, bureaucracy, commerce (economic activities) and home. Within the main categories, there were other smaller categories. For example, in commerce there were farmers and traders, and among the traders, more subcategories emerged because of different literacy practices in restaurants, bars and shops. The process of identifying and developing data categories was almost endless, as each category would lead into several different subcategories demanding further probing (Bryman, 2001).

The categories were then used to select the key informants for in-depth interviews and observations of local literacy practices in the community. The selection of key informants was therefore based on data collection, and not simply according to demographic characteristics such as age, occupation or sex. In practice, the process of selecting key informants involved collecting information from the first respondent or research site that was used for developing initial coding categories about the uses of reading and writing. The second round of data from the next respondent or observation site was coded onto the initial coding category developed from the first round of data collection. New categories continued to be identified and marked for further investigation. This process continued in an attempt to reach a point of theoretical saturation where no more new categories could be generated from either the interviews and observation of literacy use in the daily life of a particular respondent or observation of literacy use in a particular site (Bryman, 2001). This process of moving from one informant to the next based on identified new themes or categories requiring further investigation is theoretical sampling (Bryman, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In all, 39 key informants were selected for in-depth interviews and detailed observation of their literacy practices as members of the community. There were 12 women and 27 men, ranging in age from 7 to 80. Each key informant was interviewed in an initial interview for at least 3 hours. Both observations and interviews/conversations, which focused on seeking clarification or explanations of the respondents' participation in particular literacy events, often occurred spontaneously, based on the occurrence of the literacy events. In addition to interviews and conversations with key informants, multiple observations of literacy events were conducted during the fieldwork, which took place over a period of a year. These included casual conversations with a range of people other than the key informants.

The interviews were conducted and recorded in English and Luo, depending on the choice of the respondents. All names used in this article have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents. The Luo interviews were analysed in Luo but coded into coding categories identified in English. Sections of the interviews considered relevant for discussion were translated into English by the primary researcher who is a first language

speaker of the Luo language and is experienced in translating from Luo to English and English to Luo. As the analysis did not require a deeper content analysis of the words spoken, not much emphasis was put on the professional accuracy of the translation.

Observations of literacy materials in the environment were carried out and records of these observations made on observation sheets. These records included the subject of the display, location and possible sources of the displayed information. This was carried out in all the homes visited and the trading centre.

In all these processes, the role of literacy in people's lives was examined and areas in which literacy use was most prominent identified. The basic units of analysis or points of data collection were literacy events – activities in which a piece of text is involved (Heath, 1983). In addition to the field coding, the data were again coded and analysed thematically using N-vivo software (Clarke, 2005) for qualitative data analysis, following the grounded theory method of data analysis (see Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Bryman, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Harper, 1994).

Findings and discussion

Information was obtained about historical and contemporary differences between the literacy practices of the Catholic and Anglican churches as well as about current Christian literacy practices.

Historical differences

Interviews with two key informants, Paullina and Sarah, confirmed the different dispositions of the two Christian missionary groups towards literacy. Paullina, a woman in her 80s, interviewed in her home, proudly related her childhood experience of catechism in the Anglican Church in Gulu. After being displaced from her home in Gulu to Bweyale, her new home was located 300 metres from the Catholic Church. As an old and frail woman, the Catholic nuns and priest regularly visited her at her home. This proximity and the attention provided to her by the Catholic establishment convinced her to convert to Catholicism. During the interview, she related her two experiences of attending catechism, first in the Anglican Church as a child and later in the Catholic Church as an adult. Below is a translated excerpt from this interview:

Interviewer: When you were being prepared for baptism (*in the Anglican church*), were you taught how to read and write?

Paullina: Yes we were taught.

Interviewer: Were you taught using books?

Paullina: Yes, we all were taught with the Bible. Mr Lam was the one who baptised us. . . . When we were learning (*note that the words learning and reading are the same in the Acholi dialect of the Luo language*), Mr Lam was very tough with us. That teacher was tough. You put your hands like this (*demonstrates with her hands an open book in front of her face*), then you read the book, then you closed the book like this (*closes her hands to demonstrate the closing of a book*), then you had to say what you had read without hesitation straight from your head. See this line, verses number this . . . and you all had to read without hesitation, and we would read

without hesitation. Now I cannot do that. My eyes are now dim and I am not able to read now.

Interviewer: But were you able to read by the time you got baptised?

Paullina: Yes, we were able to read without hesitation because if you did not answer all his questions you could not pass. Mr Lam was a tough teacher.

(Interview with Paullina, 21 May 2005).

The other key informant, Sarah, who is about 60 years old and attended catechism in the Catholic Church as a child, said that they were never taught how to read and write. They only learned how to recite prayers and church doctrines and sing hymns. Paullina, who converted to Catholicism later in her life, related a similar experience:

Paullina: Even here Sister taught us for about two, three months.

Interviewer: I see, so even here you had to be taught again to become a Catholic.

Paullina: Yes, here the sisters were teaching us, they kept coming for me for about two or three months. Then we were baptised.

Interviewer: Did they teach you how to read and write using books during the catechism?

Paullina: Here there were no books; they were only talking to us.

Interviewer: They were only talking.

Paullina: Yes, they were only talking.

(Interview with Paullina, 21 May 2005).

Christianity and local literacy practices today

Literacy is an integral part of practising the Christian faith: in Sunday church services which also serve as a channel for community announcements; in church meetings; in choir practices; in Bible study meetings; and in individual reading of the Bible and other religious texts.

Sunday church services. Differences between Anglicans and Catholics in the direct use of texts are evident during their Sunday church services. The main difference relates to the reading of the Bible and other religious texts by members of the congregation. During the Anglican Church service, selected verses are read aloud directly from the Bible by the priest, and individual members of the congregation are often invited by the priest to read verses from the Bible during the sermon. This unpredictable Bible reading makes individual literacy skills necessary for full participation in the Sunday services. As a result, most members of the Anglican Church take their own Bibles to the Sunday service. In addition, hymn and prayer books are provided for use in the church. In one of the Anglican Sunday services:

The preacher asks a member of the congregation to stand up and read from her Bible, Matthew 8:1–10. The person stands up as requested, repeats the verse for other members, and announces the version of her Bible as the New King James Version. She reads the verses while other members of the congregation follow from

their own copies of the Bible (Field notes in Bweyale during the Anglican Church Sunday Mass, Sunday, 19 June 2005).

On the other hand, in the Catholic Church services:

The reading is being done from the Sunday missal, the main Catholic prayer book. During the sermon, the priest preaches from his own prepared text and the congregation is listening. Some members of the congregation have their own copies of the Sunday missal. The choir members have printed sheets of paper from which they are singing hymns. Most members of the congregation have no books, and do not interact with the text directly (Field notes in Bweyale Catholic Sunday Mass, Sunday, 26 June 2005).

Regular attendance at a number of church services during the period of the fieldwork showed that the procedures in the Catholic Sunday service were more ritualised, routine and predictable than in the Anglican Church. This reduces the need for individual members of the congregation to read directly from a text to guide the process, as they seem to learn the various responses required for participation in the Sunday Mass by heart. The Catholic Church services are therefore more orally based.

Whatever differences exist in the Catholic and Anglican literacy practices, both churches used printed texts to guide their proceedings and inform their behaviour. What differs is how these printed texts are used. This confirms Parry's observation that religious literacy is deeply embedded in community life (Parry, 2000a).

The role of mediators in joint literacy events. Although literacy is important in practising the Christian faith, non-literate members of the church are not excluded from participation. The priest and other literate members of the church always enable the whole community and congregation to participate in the joint Christian religious literacy practices (see Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995 for the concept of literacy mediator). For example, during the Sunday service, a few literate members of the congregation facilitate the process through reading aloud while the non-literate members learn through recitation every Sunday or during church choir practices and Bible study time. Eventually, all church members, both literate and non-literate, internalise and memorise the repetitive part of the Sunday service procedures and songs that enable the participation of all church members. This continues until changes are introduced either in the prayers or in the songs. Sarah, the non-literate Catholic woman referred to earlier, explained this:

I know there are books in the Sunday service, for me I just listen to how they are starting it, and then I respond, and sing too. For those I do not understand then it's just like that . . . I will keep quiet like a deaf person. If it reaches where I understand I will respond again. Like the rosary, I know to pray with it. If the teacher initiates a song that I know, I will also join in (Sarah, 17 January 2006).

Both the preaching and readings enable the non-literate members of the church to access the Bible teaching, memorise some verses and even refer to them during their conversations with fellow Christians. Over the years, some committed, non-literate Christians eventually acquire some rudimentary Bible literacy skills. This is a coping strategy adopted by those who are not able to read and write in order to participate in the

literate social practices of Christian life. It also demonstrates that because Christianity is embedded in African rural community life, it is an important factor in literacy use for both literate and non-literate alike.

Another form of literacy practice associated with the Sunday church service is its use as a channel for public communication through church announcements. These announcements are read aloud after most Sunday services. Through these announcements, written communications are passed on through word of mouth to other members of the community who have not come to church. However, because those who act as mediators for these announcements are those with school literacy backgrounds, these announcements are often written in English and orally translated into Kiswahili and Luo.

Other church-related literacy activities. Other church-related activities such as participation in the church choir practice and church meetings also involve a range of different literacy practices:

Choir practice involves reading and copying songs from the few available printed songbooks onto the chalkboard to be copied by the choir members into their notebooks. Some members are having difficulty in copying the songs into their notebooks. There is a lot of reading and writing taking place in this church choir practice session. It appears that everybody is reading. Because they are all looking towards the front, it is difficult to tell if they are looking at the choirmaster or reading the song written on the chalkboard and they are actively participating in the practice sessions. Those who are copying the songs into their notebooks from the chalk board in front of them are looking up to read the songs from the chalk board and bending down to copy them into their notebooks. They write with their notebooks placed on the bench on which they are sitting. Some people do not have notebooks or the printed songbook but they are still able to follow the rehearsal from the choirmaster who is leading the session. He sings a stanza and asks the members to sing after him until the tune is right. Then they all sing together. Through that process, the non-literates are also participating in the choir practices. The songs are in English, Kiswahili, and Luo (Field notes in Bweyale Catholic Church, Friday, 20 May 2005).

A church meeting was convened to discuss how to raise funds for completing the construction of a new church building.

As in most meetings, literacy has a central role. It is being used to register attendance, and record minutes. Some people are writing their names on the attendance list being passed around; others request their names to be written for them by the person sitting next to them or the one passing the list around. It is difficult to tell just by looking if those doing so are not literate. Most of those asking for their names to be written for them are women, and some are carrying babies on their laps. Generally, this meeting is like any other meeting with an agenda, a chairperson, and a secretary who is recording the proceedings. The meeting is being conducted in Luo with English and Kiswahili use by the non-Luo speakers at the meeting. Participants orally use any of the three languages, while two other people translate their contribution into the other two remaining languages. Luo is the main language of the meeting because it is spoken by most people in the meeting. English is

mainly used by educated non-Luo speakers, and Kiswahili, by uneducated non-Luo speakers. All documents, except the attendance list, are being written in English (Field notes in Bweyale Church of Uganda Parish, Sunday, 12 June 2005).

Figure 1 shows an example of the English agenda displayed on a chalkboard placed before the members. Records of such village meetings are kept in files and exercise books like the one shown in Figure 2.

School exercise books are used as personal and official record books. The book on the top of the pile is a 'RECORDING BOOKS' [sic], a notebook kept by the secretary of a village religious group. The language used on this book is an innovative creation of the writer mixing two foreign languages: English and Kiswahili. It reads 'The Books ya Division' (the non-English word in this construction is the Kiswahili word 'ya' which seems to be substituting the English word 'of'). The next line of writing is the name of the officer and his title 'securtary' [sic]. In Standard English, this could be 'The secretary's record book of the division'. This shows that in spite of often limited ability to write in English, this rural community in Uganda still insists on conducting official and public writing in English. In contrast, the second notebook in the photograph, which was a personal Bible study notebook and contained personal notes taken during the same meeting, was written in Luo. These personal notes are used to guide personal participation in meetings by referring to them regarding decisions made in previous meetings. The official minutes in the secretary's record book are not given to the members due to the problem of reproduction.

The fact that English is the primary mode of written communication in meetings, despite Luo being the predominant oral language, illustrates the dominance of English and the way in which it is associated with record-keeping, education and status (see



Figure 1. Agenda for a church meeting.



Figure 2. Record books on a worn-out Bible.

Sentumbwe, 2002). This is particularly interesting given that some church services are conducted in Luo and that the Bible and Catholic missal are written in Luo. This confirms Papen's findings in Namibia, where she found that although much of the reading and writing carried out in the Bible study groups to which Emma belonged were in the local language, English was still important in the religious identity of the learners (Papen, 2005b).

Personal religious literacy practices. The private reading of religious texts is a central focus of personal literacy practices. This was confirmed by a range of interviews and observations. Field notes from one of the regular visits to Jane, a key informant, read as follows:

Jane is sitting on a mat outside her hut enjoying the evening reading a book. She is not expecting me. She welcomes me to her home and invites me into her house. Before entering, I decide to look at what she is reading. Therefore, I bend over to check out what kind of book it is. The checking reveals a Catholic prayer book written in the Luo language (Field notes in Bweyale, Sunday, 8 May 2005).

In an interview with Josephine, another key informant who is an Anglican, she talked very passionately about the position of the Bible in her home:

The most important of all the books in this home is the Bible (Josephine, 21 May 2005).

In many of the homes visited during fieldwork, the Bible is the most frequently used book, as an examination of the photographs in Figure 3 indicates.

The worn Bible with underlined texts reveals that it is frequently used. The fact that sections of the text are underlined is evidence that the book is not only read regularly but also read attentively for a purpose. This differs from Kulick and Stroud's finding in Papua New Guinea where they found that printed matter in Gapun was only looked at, and that

'Nobody ever actually reads the Bible' (Kulick & Stroud, 1993, p. 36). In most homes which were visited, the Bible was the most prominent book in the house and was one of only a few books in the house that were visible, with the exception of children's schoolbooks.

As one of the most available texts in rural life, some people read the Bible for what they claim to be good teachings that are found in it:

Well I also observed that you can get good teachings there. Normally before my prayers I reserve some twenty minutes, I first of all get some chapters or some verses and read them, then pray for about twenty minutes and do other things later (Dagupazi, 17 November 2005).

From field observations and participation in private conversations, another feature of Bible use is its symbolisation of Christian life. Very devout Christians often carry around their Bible and use it both as reference during their everyday Christian conversations and for preaching activities that are punctuated by frequent reference to the Bible as a symbol of their Christian identity. The first author asked his old friend Onek what had been happening in his life since they last met many years ago:

With a lot of delight and aura of wellbeing, he shows me the Bible he is holding in his hand as evidence of the positive changes that have taken place in his life since we last met, and he confirms that by saying, 'I am now a believer as you can also see' (Field notes in Bweyale, Tuesday, 10 May 2005).

Other members of the community refer to such a person, who always carries the Bible and reads it often outside the Sunday Mass and privately, as a '*Morokole*' or '*dano ma olare*' (Luo, meaning 'a devout Christian' or 'saved person', respectively). The Bible in this case serves the purpose of signifying the status of people who carry it around as '*Morokole*', which is also a label of trustworthiness and very respectable social standing in the community.

In addition to the Bible, other religious texts are commonly available in Bweyale in both English and the local languages, because different religious organisations like the Jehovah's Witnesses distribute religious leaflets and books for free or sell them very



Figure 3. A worn-out English and Luo language Bible and two pages showing underlined texts in a Bible.

cheaply. These religious texts are the reading materials most available for rural people to read, even for leisure:

Sitting inside a hut built in front of a restaurant to serve as a cool shade for its customers, a man who is well known to me is busy reading a book. As I enter the hut to join him, he stops his reading to recognise my presence, and I decide to ask him what he is reading, and take a seat next to him thus being able to see the book he was reading. He abandons his reading and gives me the book to see what kind of book he was reading. The book is a Jehovah's Witness's book, 'The Greatest Man who ever lived' (Field notes in Bweyale trading centre, Sunday, 12 June 2005).

Other religious texts are visible in the form of calendars and charts that adorn the inside walls of most houses or huts. The one in Figure 4 is a religious calendar for 2004 from a Catholic primary school in Gulu Diocese.

Apart from schoolbooks, religious texts are one of the most dominant and common kinds of text in Bweyale. It is clear that these texts are central to the identity of many rural Ugandans. This reflects and confirms findings in other developing countries such as Papua New Guinea, where 'of the eighty-four specimens, all but two were connected with Christianity', that is nearly all texts in households were religious texts (Kulick & Stroud, 1993, p. 36). This suggests that the incorporation of religious literacy practices into literacy programmes could utilise the widely available religious reading materials for



Figure 4. A Catholic calendar inside a hut.

those learning how to read and write. This could be done along the lines suggested by Purcell-Gates et al. (2000, p. i). In this case, religious practices and printed materials could be used as the authentic ‘activities and texts’ employed in literacy classes.

Conclusion

The examination of literacy practices in the rural community of Bweyale has shown that practising the Christian faith provides an impetus for the use of reading and writing in a variety of contexts: formal church services, church meetings, choir practice, Bible study groups and family and individual Bible reading and prayer. These Christian literacy practices illuminate the complex ways in which literacy operates in relation to orality, choice of language in a multilingual context and the role of literacy mediators in joint religious literacy events.

Being so well rooted in rural community life, Christianity provides one of the main social frameworks within which literacy use is meaningful for both literate and non-literate members of the community. The way in which people respond to and relate to their churches shows that they are well-established social institutions that support literacy use in the community in a number of ways. Most reading materials that are freely available and are well used in this community are religious texts. Local language literacy is encouraged and acceptable practice within the church practices. People’s written linguistic creativity is not threatened or challenged by standard practices in English or Kiswahili.

Therefore, if the use of reading and writing is to be encouraged in rural community life, Christian and any other religious literacy practices should not be ignored but taken into consideration when developing adult literacy programmes or promoting reading in rural community life. This may enhance the participation of rural people in adult literacy programmes, by providing a stronger impetus for learning how to read and write. The availability of religious material may also make it easier for the people to continue practising and learning informally how to read and write. Studies of this nature have the potential to deepen our theoretical understanding of the uses of literacy as well as contribute to discussions and debates relating to literacy policy and programme development.

In the same way as this article examined the dominant influence of Christianity on local literacy practices, other areas with strong influences on local literacies will need to be examined. Additionally, from the findings of this study and literature from other studies, adult literacy curriculum development processes can potentially benefit considerably from an ethnographic approach to community literacy needs assessment instead of depending on tools pre-designed by the literacy programme organisers.

Note

1. The wider study is a PhD in progress, which is due for completion in early 2007 (George Openjuru: An ethnographic study of rural community literacy practices in Uganda, University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Adult and Higher Education).

References

- Atkinson, P. & Hammersley, M. (1994). Ethnography and participant observation. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. (pp. 248–261). London: SAGE Publications.
- Barton, D. (1994). *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. London: Routledge.
- Baynham, M. (1995). *Literacy practices: Investigating literacy in social contexts*. London: Longman.
- Bryman, A. (2001). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Byakutaga, S. & Musinguzi, R. (2000). Developing Runyakitara as an area language. In K. Parry (Ed.), *Language and literacy in Uganda*. (pp 51–65). Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Carr-Hill, R.A., Okech, A., Katahoire, A.R., Kakooza, T., Ndidde, A.N. & Oxenham, J. (2001). *Adult literacy programmes in Uganda*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Clarke, P. (2005). *Click-Start guide: QRS Nvivo version 2*. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.) (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Erben, M. (1998). Biography and research methods. In M. Erben (Ed.), *Biography and education: A reader*. Hong Kong: Falmer Press, Taylor and Francis Group.
- Fiedrich, M. & Jellema, A. (2003). *Literacy, gender, and social agency: Adventures in empowerment*. London: ActionAid.
- Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Government of Uganda (1992). *Government white paper on the implementation of the recommendation of the report of the Education Policy Review Commission*. Kampala: Uganda Printing and Publishing Corporation.
- Harper, D. (1994). On the authority of the image: Visual methods at the crossroads. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. (pp. 403–427). London: SAGE Publications.
- Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kalema, J. (2001). The socio-cultural and political conflicts in orthography reforms in Uganda. In C. Glanz & B. Okot (Eds.), *Exploring multilingual community literacies*. (pp. 12–16). Hamburg: Mehrsprachigkeit.
- Kulick, D. & Stroud, C. (1993). Conceptions and uses of literacy in a Papua New Guinean village. In B.V. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. (pp. 30–61). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nsibambi, A. (2000a). Language and literacy in Uganda: A view from the Ministry of Education and Sport. In K. Parry (Ed.), *Language and literacy in Uganda: Toward a sustainable reading culture*. (pp. 2–5). Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Nsibambi, R.J. (2000b). A language policy for national integration: Facilitators and inhibitors. In K. Parry (Ed.), *Language and literacy in Uganda: Toward a sustainable reading culture*. (pp. 16–22). Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Okech, A. (2004). Adult literacy efforts. In A. Okech (Ed.), *Adult education in Uganda: Growth, development, prospects and challenges*. (pp. 178–209). Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Onono-Onweng, N., Holmes, P. & Lumumba, P. (2004). *Celebrating 100 years of Christianity in Acholiland*. Gulu: Church of Uganda.
- Oxenham, J., Diallo, A.H., Katahoire, A.R., Mwangi, A.P. & Sall, O. (2001). *Strengthening livelihoods with literacy*. Bonn: IIZ/DVV.
- Papen, U. (2001). Literacy – your key to a better future? Literacy reconciliation and development in the National Literacy Programme in Namibia. In B.V. Street (Ed.), *Literacy and development: An ethnographic perspective*. (pp. 40–59). London: Routledge.
- Papen, U. (2005a). Literacy and development: What works for whom? Or, how relevant is the social practices view of literacy for literacy education in developing countries? *International Journal for Educational Development*, 25, 5–17.
- Papen, U. (2005b). Reading the Bible and shopping on credit: Literacy practices and literacy learning in a township in Windhoek, Namibia. In A. Rogers (Ed.), *Urban literacy: Communication, identity and learning in development contexts*. (pp. 211–234). Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education.
- Parry, K. (2000a). Literacy policy and literacy practice. In K. Parry (Ed.), *Language and literacy in Uganda: Toward a sustainable reading culture*. (pp. 59–65). Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Parry, K. (Ed.) (2000b). *Language and literacy in Uganda: Toward a sustainable reading culture*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Prinsloo, M. & Breier, M. (Eds.) (1996). *The social uses of literacy: Theory and practice in contemporary South Africa*. Amsterdam: SACHED Books and John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Probst, P. (1993). The letter and the spirit: Literacy and religious authority in the history of the Aladura movement in Western Nigeria. In B.V. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. (pp. 198–219). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., Jacobson, E. & Soler, M. (2000). *Affecting change in literacy practices of adult learners: Impact of two dimensions of instruction*. Cambridge, MA: The National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

- Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., Jacobson, E. & Soler, M. (2002). Impact of authentic adult literacy instruction on adult literacy practices. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37, 70–92.
- Rwabwoogo, M.O. (2005). *Uganda districts information handbook*. (Expanded edn). Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Scribner, S. & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sentumbwe, G. (2002). Ethnic differences in the approach to adult literacy: Experiences from a nationwide literacy training. *Adult Education and Development*, 59, 126–132.
- Smith, L.M. (1994). Biographical methods. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. (pp. 286–303). London: SAGE Publications.
- Ssekamwa, J.C. (2000). *History and development of education in Uganda*. (2nd edn). Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Street, B.V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B.V. (1993). Introduction: The New Literacy Studies. In B.V. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. (pp. 1–21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B.V. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education*. London: Longman.
- Street, B.V. (2000). Literacy events and literacy practices: Theory and practice in the New Literacy Studies. In M. Martin-Jones & K. Jones (Eds.), *Multilingual literacies: Reading and writing different worlds*. (pp. 17–29). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Street, B.V. (2001). Introduction: Ethnographic perspectives on literacy. In B.V. Street (Ed.), *Literacy and development: Ethnographic perspectives*. (pp. 1–16). London: Routledge.
- Wagner, D.A. (1995). Literacy and development: Rationales, myths, innovations, and future directions. *International Journal for Educational Development*, 15(4), 341–362.
- Wint, E. (2002). *Introduction to community development theory and practice. Resource pack*. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Received 31 March 2006; revised version received 31 August 2006.

Address for correspondence: George Ladaah Openjuru, Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, Makerere University, PO Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.
E-mail: Openjuru@yahoo.co.uk