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Literacy as placed resource in the context of a rural community member's everyday lives: The case of Bweyale in Uganda.

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Abstract

Literacy is a placed resource that is used differently in the different places of everyday life in rural communities. Bweyale is a multilingual rural community in Uganda. In this chapter, I report a study of rural community literacy use in Bweyale to show how literacy used varies from one place to another. Literacy pervades every aspect of rural community life and rural people use literacy in many rich and creative ways. Contexts for literacy use include rural community livelihoods, education, religion, bureaucracy, household and personal life. The ethnographic study reported in this chapter was informed by the theory of literacy as social practice. The findings show that literacy use is influenced by activities which are embedded in the different spaces in which people are involved as they live their everyday lives.

Introduction

Literacy is a resource that is used differently in different places of rural community member's lives. Accordingly, the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the findings on literacy as a resource in different places in rural community lives in Bweyale is discussed. These different places are places of livelihoods¹, school education, religion/church, bureaucracy and family (households). This includes the literacy uses of both literate and non-literate members of the community. The primary purpose of this chapter is therefore to show the variability of literacy as a place and space specific resource in African rural people's everyday life.

The concept of literacy.

The definition of literacy used in this chapter is that which argues that the meaning of literacy changes according to time, place, and use. These changes make defining literacy a "moving target" to borrow words from Prinsloo and Kell (1997, p. 83). For example, the definition of literacy has been moving from the ability to read and write to literacy as a social practice. New notions of multiple literacies are emerging and gaining acceptance (see Fingeret, 1993). Therefore the concept of one literacy for all places is losing its scholarly authority in explaining the concept of literacy in multiple and variable places of literacy use.

While accepting that literacy is a variable resource in different places, the different places and spaces of literacy use are overlapping categories with

¹ This may be referred to as commerce or business.

blurred boundaries. This was noted by Grabill (2001) in his study of community literacy programmes in a case study site he named Western District. For example, school literacies are part of the household literacy practices. Similarly, religious literacies like bible reading or prayers are as much part of household literacies as they are of the church. In living their everyday lives, people move in and out of different places and spaces with changing literacy requirements and demands. Participants may not consciously take notice of these shifts in their literacy use when these literacies are embedded in their ways of being. So, people move in and out of the different places and spaces, more or less consciously deploying the different literacies appropriate for these places of their everyday economic, social and political engagement. Therefore, the analysis presented in this chapter attends to the fluid and flowing nature of the movement between the different places of literacy use in community life.

The concept of places and spaces

The concept of place and space is both physical/material and abstract depending on the understanding or mental frame a person is operating in. These concepts are more pronouncedly used in the field of geography. Yi-Fun Tuan (1970, p. 387) has stated “the interpretation of spatial elements of *space* require an abstract and objective frame of thoughts.” This is where both the objectivity or materiality and subjectivity or the abstractedness of place and space comes into play. Accordingly, it is not possible to discuss the concept of space in only the physical sense of locational geography because its construction can actually change its material constituency. Of course it can be argued that space relates to the abstraction of the concepts of place and the concretisation a space realises place. This only complicates the nuance of these two concepts to make a clear case for it in any articulation. This argument is supported in recent years by Agnew and Livingstone (2011) and Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouch (2005) who discuss how space can be constitutive and agentive in organising patterns which has bearing on one’s linguistic capacities and or competencies. This applies to literacy as well in terms of being literate in a particular space/place and not in another. This then relates to the transferability of literacy as a resource between different places and spaces. I prefer to use the terminology of

place and space to make visible both the concrete and abstract nature of this concept.

Contexts and community

The concept of context is used in this chapter to refer to “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 context in my view is similar to the concept of space. Context is created by the activity which is happening in a particular place; context structures how literacy is used in a place.

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).

Therefore, in referring to literacy as a placed resource, it is important to note that as people live their everyday lives they move through and get involved in activities that are situated in different places that host different kinds of engagement with texts. This is popularly referred to as “texts in contexts”. These contexts include places of abode that provide the home environment; places of earning one’s livelihood involving local authorities that regulate such activities; schools, churches or mosques for spiritual practices that exerts their own literacy demands on the individuals; the police and the courts of law for those who have disagreements to be addressed and which also exert their own literacy demands on the people involved. Different social and administrative functions exert their literacy use requirement as well. For example, the holding of village meetings, communication with in-laws, the organisation of funerals and other social functions requiring identity exhibitions have their own literacy uses that make them what they are (see Openjuru, 2011). All these differentiate literacy use in the different places where these activities are performed.

For all these places and spaces within which rural community members live their everyday life, literacy has a role and community members must learn how to get

on with these different literacy demands as a necessary resource for their normal existence. However, for purposes of articulation, these infused or overlapping literacy use places and contexts will be discussed separately to enable the visualisation of the different literacies as resources in the different places and context in rural community life in Bweyale. I would like to caution that this chapter can easily trigger unintended imagination about literacy use in different places and spaces in rural community life. That should not be the case if a reader, contrary to how this discussion is being presented, keeps a conscious attention that there are rarely clear, fixed boundaries between these different places and contexts of literacy use in rural community life. It should also be noted that the most complex place and context is the home/household context which in a way merges all the other contexts as the convergent point in rural community life.

Location of the study

The place where this study took place is a rural community in Bweyale, a small village in Uganda. 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 was selected for this study because it is a rural Luo community, which is a culture and language very familiar to the author. The study population consisted of people living in Bweyale village and involved in its day-to-day life, which included all members of this community.

The ethnographic research methods

The study used the social practice theory of literacy that sees literacy as a variable social practice that can only be understood within the social context of its use (Street 1984). Consistent with this social practice theory of literacy, I

used ethnographic research method to collect data and grounded theory method to analyse data on literacy use in Bweyale. (Atkinson, & Hammersley, 1994; Openjuru & Lyster, 2007).

Ethnographic methods 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). A period of one year and six months were spent on data collection and analysis.

The selection of respondents and events for observations were made with a view to having as many important aspects of community life as possible included in the study . However, ‘representativeness’ (Bryman, 2001, p. 309) was not the guiding principle in this selection.

The basic units of analysis or points of data collection were literacy events - activities in which a piece of text is involved (Heath, 1983). 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), home, and literate and non-literate individuals. Within the main categories, there were sub-codes. For example, under the commerce category, there were farmers and traders, and amongst the traders, more subcategories emerged reflecting different literacy uses in places of trade such as restaurants, bars, and shops. The process of identifying and developing data categories seemed almost endless, as each category would lead into several different sub-categories demanding further probing (Bryman, 2001). In addition to the field coding, the data were again coded and analysed thematically using N-vivo software (Clarke, 2005) .

The categories were then used to select the key informants for in-depth interviews and observations of local literacy use in the community. The selection of key informants was therefore based on data collection, and not simply according to demographic characteristic 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 as resources in people's life. 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 both the interviews and observation of literacy use in the daily life of a particular respondent or observation of literacy use in a particular place or location (Bryman, 2001). This process of moving from one informant to the next based on identified new themes or categories requiring further investigation is called theoretical sampling (Bryman, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In all, 39 key informants were selected for in-depth interviews and detailed observation of their literacy use as members of the community was done. There were 12 women and 27 men, ranging in age from seven to 80. It is difficult to say precisely how many times the key respondents were interviewed and for how long because both observation and interviews/conversations, focused on seeking clarification or explanations of the respondents' participation in particular literacy events in different locations. This often occurred spontaneously based on the occurrence of the literacy events in the different locations related to the daily lives of the respondent. Each key informant was interviewed in an initial interview for at least three hours. 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 and six months. These included casual conversations with a range of people other than the key informants.

The interviews were conducted and recorded in both English and Luo depending on the choice of the respondents. The Luo interviews were analysed in the local language but coding categories were 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.

Observations of the surrounding literacy materials on display 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 and the purpose it is serving. This was carried out in all the homes visited and the trading centre. In all these processes, the role of literacy as a resource in peoples' lives was examined and areas in which literacy use were most prominent identified

Findings of the study

The findings are grouped according to the different places in which literacy is used as a resource to function in those spaces in rural community life in Bweyale. The key focus is to show the different role literacy plays in different activities taking place in different places. It also focuses on the different formats literacy use takes for different activities in different locations.

Livelihoods as a context for literacy use in rural community life

One context that defines literacy use as a placed resource in rural community life is livelihoods. In this chapter, livelihood is taken to mean any activity that people do to earn a living or for the purposes of survival. Examples include: handicraft, casual employment, agriculture, running a bars, restaurants, shops, and other such activities (see Oxenham et al., 2002). I refer to some of these activities as commercial or business activities. In this livelihood context, there are many different uses for literacy use. These include use of naming and identifying shops on signboards, recording daily transactions, recording incomes, managing creditors and debtors. While these activities may be similar across different livelihood activities, there is standard format that is common to all. For example, each shopkeeper or restaurant owner would create their own individual methods and format of record keeping in the management of their particular livelihood activities.

In the following sections, literacy use in different places of livelihood activities are presented. These places are the trading centre and those that take place outside the trading centre. In the trading centre, there are activities like selling in bars, operating restaurants, shops, selling in the market, operating

accommodation facilities for travellers' accommodation (lodges), and *Bodaboda* riding. Note that these activities occupy different geographical spaces. They are mostly commercial livelihood activities, which constitute the largest areas, where the skills of reading and writing are increasingly being used as a resource in livelihood management. The only livelihood activity in which reading and writing is involved outside the trading centre is farming.

These activities are interconnected in many ways. For example, farmers bring their farm produce like maize to sell in the market that is located in the trading centre, and thus get involved in commercial literacy uses related to selling in the market (Street, 1984). Therefore, a description of the literacy practices of a farmer will naturally flow into some aspects of commercial literacies in the market. Two examples illustrate the difference place makes to literacy for livelihood practices. The first example is advertising and identification of products on sale (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Adverts in a Trading center

In these advertising signs, colour and writing style are deployed as part of a practice used to distinguish the products or services on offer. For example the yellow colour is a corporate colour of a Mobile Telephone Network (MTN).

Another example is shown in Figure 2 below. It is not exactly a trademark because different healers use different style of presentations but a discourse, as it were, for traditional healers merges these ways of using reading and writing into an identifiable category.



Figure 2: Advert of a traditional healer in the community

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Below is an idiosyncratic record of a bar seller .

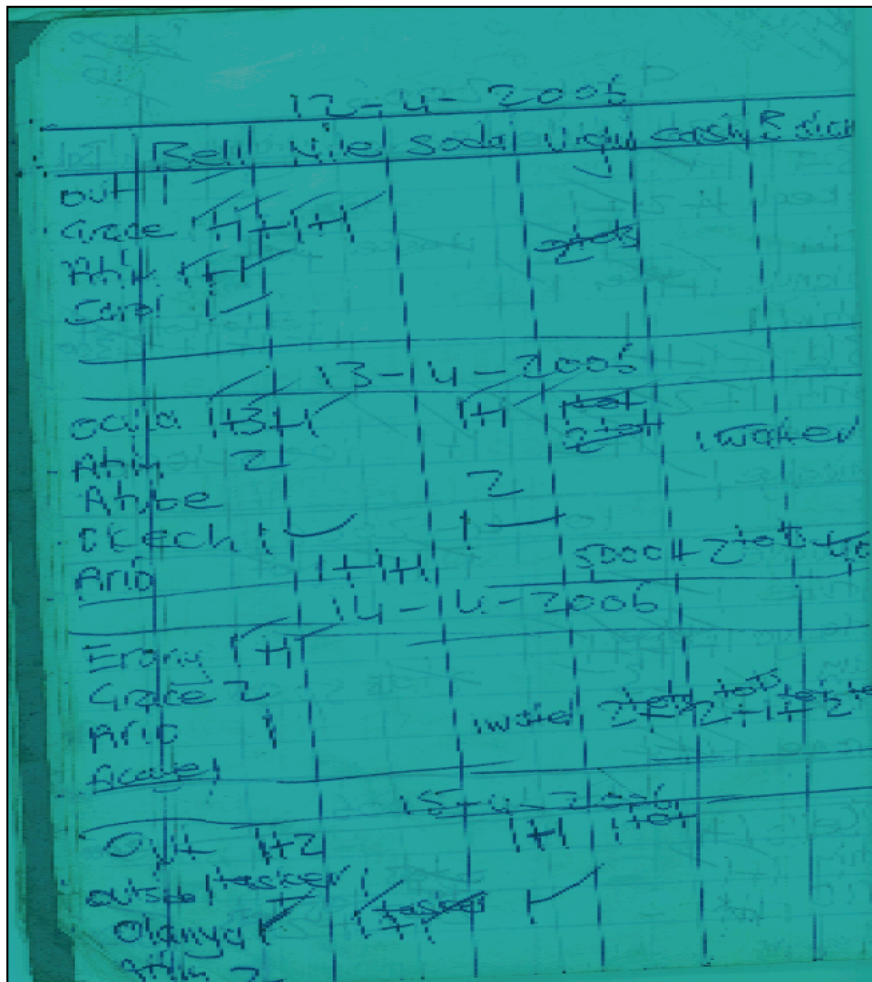


Figure 3: Bar record sales book

The page contains sales records of four days: the 12th, 13th, 14th, and 15th of April 2006. On this page appear the names of customers, if known to the seller, or their

identification markers if the seller does not know the customer by name. For example, “*Out*,” means the customer was sitting outside the bar. The heading of each column is labelled with the names of the different brands of beer. For example, *Ug/W* stands for Uganda Waragi. The last two columns are labelled *Cash* and *balance*. That is where the seller records her debtors. The resourcefulness of the seller in using literacy in this commercial context is very evident and uncontested.

Literacy and Schools as contexts in rural community life

Another significant area for literacy use in rural community life in Bweyale is in connecting school education and everyday community life. This comes in the forms of school homework, school reports, textbooks, direct communication with families, and parents’ participation in school management functions.

This school context includes other school related activities in the home like private study time at home. These activities are what link the school to most households in the communities. The activities generate regular literacy events in the community, particularly at the family level. For example, homework is brought from school to be done at home and the process of doing homework generates a literacy event within the home domain. Note that the school literacy use at home is configured differently by the home space and it is not exactly the same with how literacy is used in the school space. This is where the place influence on literacy as a resource is very evident.

Christianity as a context for literacy use

The Christian religion is another major influence that defines literacy use in different places like religious institutions and homes. Literacy is an important and integral resource for participation in churches and other places of worship. Literacy use in these places of worship are very unique from those found in livelihood and schools. Books, reading practices during worship are inseparable in these places. So religion as a discourse structures literacy use in different places in the life of rural people.

Bureaucratic institutions and community literacy practices

Bureaucratic institutions exist or extend their control or influence in every part of the country, and they shape people's lives in many ways. By bureaucratic institutions, I mean the institutional structures that are set up by government or the people themselves to regulate community or institutional life. Bureaucratic institutions are one of the main areas in which literacy is an indispensable resource .

These institutions influence the use of reading and writing in people's everyday lives and literacy ensures that they exist and operate as institutions. These forms of text use are what Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 229) call "bureaucratic and technical literacies". Examples of these literacies include those involved in processing identification documents, travel permits, making statements at the police stations and many other activities related to official documents and documentations. The bureaucratic institutions in Bweyale are visible and active in rural community life. They include the police service, clinics/health centres, the LC Offices², The Uganda Revenue Authority/Government tax offices, banking/credit institution and development NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) that have offices or officers operating in rural areas. These organisations deal with a number of community issues in which literacy has a central and unique role.

Literacy in rural household management.

The discussion about literacy practices in rural homes in Bweyale has been inspired by the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998) in Lancaster. In their work, the home domain is approached as a rich collection of literacy practices that go on in other literacy domains in the community. Citing Gee (1990), Barton and Hamilton refer to such literacy practices as "borderlands" between home and the other domains of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 188). Pitt (2000) identifies the different literacy domains as the home (private) literacy practices,

² The official definition of bureaucracies excludes organisations like the local councils because they are elected institutions in the community. The standard definition of bureaucracies is "a government that is administered primarily by bureaus that are staffed with non-elective officials" (Wordweb, 2005, electronic dictionary). Local councils are elective officials. I have decided to use a much wider definition to include the local council because they work together with the non-elective institutions like the police.

school education, and the work place (livelihood). This was the same with the findings of Barton and Hamilton (1998) in their study of community literacy practices in Lancaster. The richness of home literacy practices makes the home an interesting site when discussing literacy as a resource in different places and contexts in rural community literacy practices.

Like in all other places, the literacy practices that takes place in homes depend on the activities in which people are engaged in their daily home life. Examples of these activities include preparing children for school; going to the farm or market to do some farming or selling/buying some products respectively; laundry and cleaning up; cooking the family meals; church and church related activities like bible reading and family prayers; writing and receiving personal communications; reading the local newspaper. This further show that even within the same place, literacy is differently resourceful for different activities (Openjuru, 2011; 2008).

Literacy for pleasure and leisure .

Personal literacy here refers to what a person does with their reading and writing skills during their own free time out of their own motivation and not because of some outside or extrinsic motivation like religious practices or participation in livelihoods. For example, Tumuboine, a shopkeeper said, *“I read to pass time,”* and to tell stories to friends, *“That is why people come here they just want stories from me. I tell them this has happened this and this and this”* (Interview with Tumuboine conducted in English on 24th September 2005).

Odong, the police officer, reads to keep up to date with current affairs. He said, *“When you have a coin, you can buy newspapers and read to know what is going on in the country”* (Interview with Odong conducted in English on 22nd December 2005). Figure 4. Shows one of the Ugandan dailies that people can access because of their ability to read.



Figure 4: One of the national newspapers read in Bweyale.

Bakayeka, a secondary school teacher, reads to get inspiration. *“What I have discovered is that books contain a lot of stories. Others can give you good ways of life, others can give you advice, and tell you the stories of other people and how they are doing the things in their lives and how they are going through all the problems they were facing in life. So that one gives me real dignity and confidence”* (Interview with Bakayeka conducted in English on 8th January 2006). Dagupazi, a secondary school teacher, said he reads, *“To know how to live in this environment”* (Interview with Dagupazi conducted in English on 17th November 2005). In this case literacy is a personal resource.

Figure 5 below shows the local news-stands with people accessing information by freely browsing the headlines through the pages of the newspaper for pleasure and following up on news. The manner of literacy use in such open space/place is defined by the arrangement as the different pictures in figure five is showing. In this case people are using their reading and language capabilities to catch up with the day’s news while standing and reading papers that are placed on the ground or picked from a news stand. The papers come in the local language and English.



Figure 5: People browsing newspapers at a newsstand and a newspaper vendor for free.

In places of relaxation leisure or entertainment, literacy use also changes accordingly. In the next example we see, people using literacy for recording scores in a game of cards, played with a minimum of two people (see Figure 6). Literacy is also used for organising participation in this game. This was the most common game played in this village and in the trading centres and is generally played by young men between the ages of 15 and 30. The game itself involves reading numbers and letters on cards. At the start of this game, the card is distributed to the players randomly and they are expected to play all the cards in their hands. The one who plays all the cards in his hand first is the winner. The winner is awarded the highest score of zero and the loser is the player who remains with the highest total sum of all the cards remaining in his hand. The whole game involves both adding up totals and reading cards with different values attached to them. It is a very complex practice that structures the use of literacy and numeracy.

KK	OJ	OK	OC	NY	OS	JO	OR	KK	OG
02	34	54	70	-	49	20	60	50	62
52	84	90	140	46	195	196	147	50	141
83	155	90	307	51	248	196	177	175	234
102	249	107	307		221	196	177	175	234
170	283	228	307	90	291	252	281	221	234
175	332	255	247	130	341	362	331	267	274
237	377	329	247	174	364	384	320	300	274
241	409	329	297	174	390	Out	349	325	399
286	409	352	408	273	410		395	432	399
370	469	352	Out	357	462		401	452	416
410	469	400		436	Out		401	494	485
421	409	418		470			401	499	Out
421	428	440		493			201	Out	
431	428	494		493			446		
Out	Out	Out		493			486		
OJ	KK	JO		493			496		

Figure 6: Record of game of cards.

In Figure 6 we see that the record of each player is entered in a column labelled with the initials of their names e.g. KK, OJ, and OK. I only got access to these records so I do not know the names that the initials stand for and it is that which makes this record a singular artefact.

To enter the score, a person needs to know how the scores are calculated and how the winner is determined. This requires knowledge of the value of the different cards especially those that are provided with negotiated values like 'A', 'J' and 'Q'. The scores for each round of the game are recorded in a row under the name of each player, while the record of each player is recorded in a column labelled with the player's initials. The score for each round of the game is added on to the previous score. The player with the lowest score is the winner while a player with the largest score is the loser who is eliminated. This elimination goes on until only two people are left and the person who wins that last contest is declared the overall winner, and the game starts all over again. Other games, like darts, also use literacy in a similar way to record the scores and control participation in the game (Openjuru, 2011; 2008).

Literacy as a resource for community mobilisation and organisation

Literacy is very important in rural community life for organising social events in rural community life.



Figure 7: Literacy in organising social events in the community.

The two photos in Figure 7 were taken at one event to show evidence of literacy use during a social function in the community (note the visible pen and papers in both photos).

During this social event, literacy was used in a variety of other ways including delivering public speeches and scheduling activities. The activities being scheduled included dances and the presentation of gifts by different social and economic groups in the community.



Figure 8: Writing to identify group and oneself during a social event.

The different social and economic groups presenting their dances to entertain the guests during this social event also used literacy to identify themselves in

relation to other groups. They did this by wearing T-shirts with their names printed on them, and wrote their group names on their dancing headgear (see Figure 8 above) and on flags. They were happy to be photographed hoping to appear in the national media with the intention of broadcasting their presence in this social event and the community at large.



Figure 9: Literacy use in labelling gift for a royal visitor.

Figure 9 shows a unique blend of literacy use. The sheep is a gift to a Paramount Chief who was visiting. The wrapping of the sheep with a piece of cloth is to symbolise it as a gift and show respect for the Chief. The leopard skin is to symbolise the sheep as royal gift and the writing on a piece of paper hanging from the side of the sheep is bearing the name of the group giving the sheep to the Paramount Chief of the Acholi People. In this, literacy is part of many other symbolic signs put together to communicate a message relating to giving a royal gift. The most interesting distinction in this combination of symbols is that literacy is appearing in English. This confirms the findings of Fishman (1991) among the Amish in North America who use literacy in ways that are specific to their culture as Amish people.

Generally, most of the pictures above were taken during a community function organised to welcome a traditional Paramount Chief of the Acholi people who came from Gulu to visit his people in Bweyale. On that day, there were a lot of

speeches, and gifts being handed over to the Paramount chief who had come from Gulu to visit the Acholi who had in Bweyale.

Literacy as a resource for decorations and attractive display

The photos of graffiti on the walls of a grass-thatched huts is evidence of literacy use for pleasure and as a decorative art display by children and young people (See Figure 10 below). One of the examples of graffiti seems to have been motivated by the Independence Day's mood. (The photo was taken 4 days after the celebration of Uganda's Independence Day that is marked on October 9th every year). Below the statement of "INDIPENDENT DAY" is another motivation, religion, it reads, "I LOVE YOU GOD". This shows two powerful forces in the rural community's life, politics and religion. Then family relations, "I love you my boys".



Figure 10: Graffiti on the outside walls of two different huts.

In both cases, English is used and it confirms the hegemony and dominance of English as the language of literacy in people's perception of reading and writing. Note the spelling of independent. In Standard English this should read, "Independence day". Literacy is important in people's lives everywhere.

General discussion and conclusion

In this discussion, attempts to show that literacy is a resource that is differentially used in everyday life in Bweyale for livelihoods, school education, religions, bureaucracy, households, and personal leisure and pleasure. It also revealed that the majority of these categories of literacy use in different locations are influenced by and sustains social institutions and activities in rural community life.

Literacy related to institutions is generally functional in the sense of accomplishing everyday life and work-related tasks. Examples of these tasks include, attending church/prayers, selling farm produce in the market, keeping bar records of transactions, monitoring children's schoolwork, organising and participating in public meetings, organising community social events, reading and writing personal letters and notes to organise ones daily life, and knowing what is happening through reading newspapers. Literacy for learning new skills is limited. The only instance of such literacy was with the farmers. Whatever the case, almost every aspect of literacy is evident in this community although in varying proportions, with literacy in managing activities in different livelihood practices being more prominent than literacy for learning or leisure .

This show that, although the home is the hub of most literacy activities in the community, there is very limited reading and writing that is specific to home life because the traditional way of life that still predominates in the home environment is not dependant on reading and writing. In the same way, most of the activities in which reading and writing is used in the community generally tend to be those activities which are non-traditional to the local people, and very complex to manage mentally.

Basically Literacy is used in rural community life in organising social and economic activities in the community and by both children and adults in many ways. One notable in all these forms of literacy use is the choice of English as the language

Finally, this Chapter was more expository than conclusive. There is need for further investigation in the different places in which literacy is used. Therefore, each of the major places for literacy use identified in this study requires further investigation independently.

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