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# 13

## Re-membering Kenya: Building Library Infrastructures as Decolonial Practice

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*Syokau Mutonga and Angela Okune*

### Introduction

‘What are you going to do with the lion’s head?’ I, Angela Okune (AO) asked Syokau Mutonga (SM), teasingly but genuinely curious. I was referring to a stuffed lion’s head which seemed to have become somewhat of an infamous McMillan Library mascot among those who visited. The lion’s head (Figure 13.1 on the next page) caught my eye during my first visit to the McMillan Library in February 2019; left atop a dusty table outside the second-floor Africana library, it looked as if someone had tossed it there years ago and had not bothered to move it since. The clear lack of regard for it – as if the librarians and library staff didn’t know what to do with it – was perhaps what struck me as much as the very materiality of a decaying lion’s head just laid out for anyone to touch. But a few weeks later, when I returned on a sleepy Saturday with my four-year-old son in tow, having enticed him to come with me by telling him he would get to see a real lion’s head at the library, it wasn’t there. It had been moved. Needless to say, my son was mad at me for making false promises. But the removal of the lion’s head from public view also flagged for me its paradox. The lion’s head was illustrative of a double bind that the staff at McMillan Library, not to mention others working on reviving and establishing libraries in diverse postcolonial and settler-colonial sites around the world, are grappling with – what to remember and what to forget in attempts to decolonise. What to do with the massive ivory tusks of some poor elephant who happened to be living at the wrong period of time, when Kenya was a colonial site of hunting expeditions for White foreigners, like Sir William Northrup McMillan (Box 13.1)? What to do with a decaying lion’s head? These charismatic items are a strange delight for tourists to the library – Kenyans and non-Kenyans alike – although for regular library users they are quickly normalised as part of the Library’s environment. Such artefacts give the Library ‘character’ and are material reminders of Kenya’s colonial and imperial past and present. How to contextualise these materials and memories appropriately? Not to glorify or romanticise an adventurous past that centres the heinous deeds of White ‘frontiersmen’, but also not to erase them and their historical presence, since doing so risks ignoring the influence such colonial logics had and have on continued imperial formations.



**Figure 13.1:** *The lion's head that can be found – sometimes – in McMillan Library's main branch, Nairobi, Kenya.*  
Photo credit: Angela Okune

In this chapter, we reflect on these challenges and the work currently being undertaken by teams and individuals seeking to revitalise libraries in and for various Kenyan publics in Nairobi. We are in full-throated agreement with the need to decolonise libraries and other knowledge infrastructures (Box 13.2 opposite). However, without intending to misrepresent important and necessary decolonial work, we suggest that, in practice, decolonising might look similar to ‘forget and move on’, a force that we describe as having failed to address historic injustices and violence in the country. But if decolonising is in fact *not* the same as forgetting the British legacy, what is it? We suggest that looking to progressive librarianship (Durrani, 2014) might offer a counterpoint to ‘forget and move on’ and a way to think about what decolonising without forgetting might look

like. We frame the work being done by Book Bunk, a not-for-profit trust undertaking restoration of the McMillan Libraries in Nairobi, as progressive librarianship and describe the ways in which the Book Bunk team are attempting to decolonise the libraries in ways that avoid getting caught in a culture of ‘forget and move on’. The role of the academic library is not explicitly the focus of this chapter, but we believe that Book Bunk’s experiences are applicable to other kinds of libraries, including Nairobi’s university libraries.

#### **Box 13.1: McMillan Library**

The McMillan Memorial Library, one of the oldest libraries in Kenya, was established by Lady Lucie McMillan in memory of her late husband, US-born philanthropist Sir William Northrup McMillan. The Library opened its doors in 1931 to Europeans only until its management was handed over to the Nairobi City Council in 1962 on the eve of national independence. American millionaire William Northrup McMillan came to Kenya in 1904 on a shooting expedition and decided he would stay. He became a British citizen during the First World War and received a knighthood for his wartime services. He is well-known for having hosted former US President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909 at his lavish estate in Kenya. He died in 1925. To learn more about the history and context of McMillan Library, visit the digital exhibit ‘McMillan Library’ (Matathia and Okune, 2019, <https://stsinfrastructures.org/content/mcmillan-library/essay>).

**Box 13.2: Knowledge infrastructures**

The term ‘knowledge infrastructures’ refers to the people, artefacts, institutions and relations that generate, share and maintain specific knowledge about the human and natural worlds. In this chapter the term is pluralised to highlight, as Borgman (2020) notes, that knowledge infrastructures are not one system but are numerous, multilayered and adaptive systems, each with unique origins and goals, that are always interfacing and interacting. Included under the umbrella of the term are the infrastructures underlying academic and non-academic research, libraries, archives, data repositories and scholarly publishers – both the built material spaces of these institutions and the technical platforms and human and social networks that give them vibrancy and life.

**Re-membering, decolonising, re-collecting****The African library**

The African library did not originate in and with colonialism. In ancient Ghana’s cosmopolitan city of Timbuktu, for example, the most profitable trade items were books. Under Mansa Musa’s rule from the 13th to 17th centuries, Islamic learning centres, schools, universities and an incredible library were established in Mali. In the city of Chinguetti in Mauritania, libraries containing over 1,000 Quranic manuscripts survive to this day (Jurgens and Momoniat, 2020). Today, ancient manuscript collections, some dating back to the eighth century CE, are re-emerging across the continent. Nonetheless, the role of the library within African society is still up for grabs. ‘You can tell who the library was supposed to serve simply by its placement in the city,’ explained Trevas, a University of Nairobi anthropology student who was helping me (AO) to develop a crowdsourced map of libraries and archives in the city. ‘McMillan was only for White settlers when it first opened and is in what today is considered “uptown” Central Business District, whereas Ismail Rahimtulla Walji Trust Library was meant for all people from day one and sits in “downtown”.’ Diverse libraries and archives are dotted all over Nairobi (Box 13.3, next page) – some in the heart of the Central Business District’s hustle and bustle, some located within social justice centres in densely populated informal settlements and some far away from the residences of working-class Kenyans, located within foreign embassy compounds in leafy Gigiri. These libraries serve diverse users and agendas, funded by philanthropic donors, foreign and state governments, non-governmental organisations and individuals, Kenyan and non-Kenyan alike. There are also public libraries under the national government (Kenya National Library Service) and university libraries that primarily serve academics and students. A new cadre of Kenyan digital humanities specialists have also entered the Nairobi library and archives ecosystem and include the African Digital Heritage initiative (<https://africandigitalheritage.com>), focusing on the application of technology in the preservation, engagement and dissemination of African heritage; the Museum of British Colonialism ([www.museumofbritishcolonialism.org](http://www.museumofbritishcolonialism.org)) which has digitally recreated Mau Mau detention camps; WerJoKenya ([www.werjokenya.com](http://www.werjokenya.com)), an online journal that seeks to document,

highlight, protect and celebrate Kenya's diverse musical history; and Paukwa (<https://paukwa.or.ke>), a counter-narrative online library of Kenya's histories.

**Box 13.3: Nairobi's libraries and archives**

Although this chapter is featured in a collective volume focused on libraries, there are also references to archiving, because many of the libraries in Kenya also house or have housed archival collections.

A crowdsourced map produced in 2019 of libraries and archives in Nairobi can be found at <https://researchke.ushahidi.io/views/map>. Though not comprehensive, it is a start to aggregating information about the diverse libraries in Kenya. This map contributed towards another, more comprehensive map of Nairobi public libraries and archives published by Book Bunk in 2021 (available at their website [www.bookbunk.org](http://www.bookbunk.org)).

Trevas and I observed the varying levels of security at the different library locations. While some libraries like Alliance Française had security rivalling the international airport, others had no security, except perhaps their lack of marking. One could easily, for example, pass the Ukombozi Library hundreds of times without ever knowing its location. The books held by Ukombozi were once part of the Mwakenya movement's collection. Mwakenya, an underground Kenyan socialist movement especially active in the 1980s, was formed to fight for multiparty democracy, and these books, which became accessible to the public only in 2017, are today located on the third floor of a building largely constructed of cement and iron-sheet roofing across from the University of Nairobi. The well-worn stairs up to the library hint at decades of foot traffic.

## Colonialism as dismemberment of Africa

For activist scholars, researchers and those working in the creative arts in Nairobi, the question of decolonising the library and broader centres of knowledge is not a metaphor (compare Tuck and Yang, 2012). It is a question of where to put the lion's head and elephant tusks, dismembered animal parts that are metonymic of the dismemberment of Kenyans. Kenyan philosopher Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009) describes Europe's contact with Africa as one characterised by dismemberment. During the first stage, he explains, the African personhood was divided into two halves: the continent and its diaspora. The second stage was the literal fragmentation of the African continent and its reconstitution into British, French, Portuguese, German, Belgian and Spanish Africa through the Berlin Conference of 1884. Finally, he mentions the additional dismemberment of the diasporic Africans who were separated not only from their continent and labour but also from their very sovereign being. When we write, then, of 're-membering', we are in conversation with Ngũgĩ and others' work on the dismembering of African personhood past and present and grappling with how to 're-member' the African body politic, who have been divided from their land, body and mind.

Decolonisation has become an important political and rallying cry across many contexts and parts of the world. We are decisively in agreement with the need to

decolonise the library and other knowledge infrastructures. However, as digital data scholars Jane Anderson and Kimberly Christen (2019) have noted, there have been many blanket professional calls to decolonise archives and libraries without attention to the tools, techniques and technologies that perpetuate ongoing processes and attempts at dispossession of land, resources and knowledges. The symbolic renaming of streets and buildings is an important part of the practices of decolonising. Doing so renounces the colonial regime and its ideology and redefines a city's identity with symbols of nationalism and pan-Africanism. As Wanjiru and Matsubara (2017) have discussed, in the process, street names can act as sites for the restitution of justice, spatial memory and ethnic unity. However, without intending to misrepresent important and necessary decolonial work, we suggest that in these practices decolonising might also look similar to 'forget and move on', a force we describe as having failed to address historic injustices and violence in the country. Quoted in a 2014 news article in the local newspaper, Dedan Kĩmathi Waceke, the grandson of leading freedom fighter Kĩmathi wa Waciũri (who is known widely as Dedan Kĩmathi), claimed that not enough was being done to honour the freedom fighters who helped to secure Kenyan independence from the British (Kimani, 2014). 'It's unfortunate that the people that are in this generation do not realise how painful a price it was to pay. They take it for granted,' he stated, causing a stir when he chained himself to a statue of his grandfather situated on Kimathi Street in Nairobi (renamed from the colonial-era 'Hardinge Street'). Michael Kĩng'ori, another descendant of Mau Mau freedom fighters was quoted as saying: 'We are slowly killing our country's history. Naming of roads and erecting statues of honour is the only way we can remember the great freedom fighters of the country' (Kimani, 2014). Clearly though, renaming streets and erecting statues are not sufficient ends for 'decolonising'. In an article analysing the symbolism of the Dedan Kĩmathi statue unveiled in Nairobi in 2007, Annie Coombes quotes an excerpt from periodical *The East African*: 'A better memorial would be an honest retelling of the story of his [Kĩmathi's] struggle ...' (Coombes, 2011, 210).

In the young Kĩmathi's plea for remembering his grandfather, we hear a plea that goes beyond renaming another street but, rather, calls for greater structural changes towards realising the freedom fighters' vision of an emancipatory future for all Africans. In the following sections we share some of these dreams and critiques of the colonial and postcolonial governments as articulated by two generations of Kenyan activists, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (colloquially known as Mau Mau) and the Mwakenya movement, to help move from 'decolonising' to thinking more practically about what it means to practise progressive librarianship. In this way we seek to expand the lens of practice and analysis, foregrounding voices from the past and present that should lead in discussions of what exactly 'decolonising' entails.

Here, then, decolonisation becomes not only about undoing the harms and legacies of colonialism but, importantly, about including a practice of (re)collecting radical imaginings of alternative futures (Kelley, 2003). By 'radical' we refer to addressing the root problem (rather than simply shifting rhetoric about the problem, for example).

Cultivating a capacity for such radical imagination is and will continue to be the task at hand for our generation and future generations who look to re-collect the vibrancy of Nairobi's public sphere in the 1960s and 1970s, when there was active and creative visioning of an Africa for and by Africans (Musila, 2019). A challenge to cultivating capacities for such radical reimagining comes from a mode of 'forget and move on' which has prevented important grappling with ongoing colonial habits and logics. In the next section we discuss what we have observed as a 'forget and move on' approach to national memory and trauma and join critiques by public figures like Patrick Gathara (2020b; 2020a) who argue that unfair, unequal and at times violent actions of state and non-state actors are glossed over through 'forget and move on' discourses.

### **Forget and move on: Kenya's institutionalised amnesia**

Citing Milan Kundera, Firoze Manji has noted, 'When you want to liquidate a people's culture, the first step is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history, then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster' (Manji, 2020). Manji (2020) argues that the last 30 years of neoliberal politics in Kenya have resulted in a profound dispossession of memory. Many Kenyans born or raised during or in the aftermath of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) have lost connection with their own history, partly due to the lack of investment in local institutions of knowledge and memory, as well as erasure of Kenyan resistance, silenced through state violence.

SAPs were a scheme of loans from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s that were accompanied by policy conditions which included the liberalisation of trade and the privatisation of many government enterprises. Today, SAPs are recognised as having had widespread negative impacts on the well-being of citizens, especially those most marginalised in the country (Emeagwali, 2011). It is often assumed that SAPs primarily impacted on health access and social services; in fact, the deep impact of SAPs on the contemporary state of Kenyan schools, libraries, data infrastructure and overall scientific capacity cannot be overstated. In the period prior to the imposition of SAPs, academic libraries were part of a Kenyan university culture of student activism and decolonial strategising, a key site of student activism (Klopp and Orina, 2002). However, academic libraries in the region since the 2000s have had a limited role in contemporary decolonial movements. While the history and geopolitics of structural adjustment are distinct from the history invoked by decolonising the library, it is crucial to see the connections.

There is still little public discourse about the detrimental effects of the SAPs on/in Kenya. This is most likely because part of their legacy is that they limited funds for public services like libraries and public universities. Of course, this is not to discount the important work by Subbo (2007), Rono (2002), Oyugui, Kigozi and On'gwen (1997) and

others on SAPs in Kenya, but to note that critiques of these programmes have largely been relegated to the academy and do not circulate in everyday conversation as we have learned, anecdotally, they do in other national contexts such as Zimbabwe. Any mention of the SAPs' lasting and ongoing effects on public services and systems is largely absent in both regular media reporting and educational curricula, including in history classes. This 'structurally adjusted' Kenya, whose public infrastructures have been defunded and local industries debilitated as a result of requisite financial policies imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions, offers a starting point for understanding how multinational private corporations today have such a captive audience for their 'free' services. We will expand on this at the end of this chapter.

First, we want to briefly discuss the Mwakenya movement, since the deliberate erasure of its legacy is important to understanding both the force of 'forget and move on' and also the foundations from which Durrani's concept of progressive librarianship (2014) developed and grew. We build on work by Joyce Nyairo, who writes: 'one of the glaring fault lines in the construction of the Kenyan nation is not the absence of memory, but rather the deliberate institutionalisation of amnesia' (Nyairo, 2015, 69). She refers to the 'deliberate erasure of ... any semblance of remembrance that celebrates a version of being or becoming in ways and forms that run contrary to the singular version that is inscribed by the state and the institutions that enable it' (Nyairo, 2015, 69). The work of Nyairo (2015), Gathara (2020b), Manji (2020) and others suggest that a dominant narrative in Kenya of 'forget and move on' glosses over unfair, unequal and at times violent actions of the state and non-state actors, and avoids tackling the underlying root of the issues (several key moments in recent Kenyan history include the post-election violence in 2007/8 and the terrorist attacks on the Westgate Mall in 2011, which have furthered a habit and national narrative of 'forget and move on', but which we do not have the space to expand on in this chapter). Such a lack of resolution at particular moments in Kenyan history leads to an increasingly disillusioned and cynical public who do not trust public narratives or institutions, and who are also missing a deep connection to their own liberation histories of resistance, where rich dreams of decolonial futures could provide the nutrition and support for their own to be established.

## Kenya's Mwakenya movement

In the late 1980s the Moi government initiated a crackdown on an underground political movement known as 'Mwakenya' (*Muungano wa Wazalendo wa Kukomboza Kenya* or the Union of Patriots for the Liberation of Kenya) who were described by the government as a group of very dangerous individuals engaged in a guerrilla war. In fact, the Mwakenya movement was formed to fight for multiparty democracy, and its members, who included many Kenyan university faculty and students, advocated for the opening up of democratic spaces in Kenya. However, the movement was forced underground, due to state violence. Moi is quoted as saying: 'From today you should keep quiet. I don't want to hear anything



again about Mwakenya.’ ‘Keep quiet,’ Moi repeated. ‘The government will deal with them one by one. We will collect them so don’t mention Mwakenya again. Let’s keep quiet and go on collecting them. I am happy that we have uncovered them and they are naming their fellow collaborators. This is very encouraging. If you were involved in this thing you should be worried’ (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Citizens for Justice, 2003, 3–4).

Twenty years earlier, in the years following independence, the country was jubilant and ready for the start of a bright Pan-African future. The university was a key site for decolonial thinkers excited to reimagine society and rid it of colonial structures and logics. But by the late 1970s, these same intellectuals were labelled dangerous traitors by a government who saw them as potential high risks that could incite the public against the state. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o was one such leader. In 1977 his controversial play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*, written with Ngũgĩ wa Mirii, was performed at Kamirithu Educational and Cultural Centre. Because it was sharply critical of the inequalities and injustices in Kenyan society, unequivocally championed the cause of ordinary Kenyans and was committed to communicating with Kenyans in the local languages of their daily lives, in 1977 Ngũgĩ was arrested and imprisoned without charge at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. Later, while Ngũgĩ was in Britain for the launch and promotion of his work, he learned about the Moi regime’s plot to eliminate him on his return. This forced him into exile, first in Britain and then the USA, where he resides today (Thiong’o, 1981).

Ngũgĩ was one of many Kenyan intellectuals forced into exile during the 1980s. Using a 1982 coup as justification, the Moi regime arrested hundreds of faculty and students. The University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University were closed for one year, and on reopening in 1983 were divided into several faculty administrative units, part of divide and rule tactics. The Moi special police force invaded university libraries and removed all books by or on Vladimir Illyich Lenin, Karl Marx, Che Guevara, Malcom X, Franz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Maina wa Kinyatti and Fidel Castro (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Citizens for Justice, 2003). Reading these books or others published by the Mwakenya movement led to quick detention. For instance, in the early 1980s security forces were deployed to look for copies of *Pambana*, the first underground anti-imperialist and anti-neocolonial newspaper since independence; anyone caught reading or distributing such material was arrested. Leading thinkers arrested at this time included Maina wa Kinyatti, Mukaru Ng’ang’a and Willy Mutunga (Gisesa, 2020). Despite Mwakenya’s being branded as a terrorist organisation by the Moi government, Professor Isaiah Ngotho Kariuki, a former dean in the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Nairobi and Mwakenya leader is quoted in a 2013 news article debunking this claim: ‘Our movement was not clandestine. It was a public movement where we gave open lectures and distributed literature to tell Kenyans what was wrong with the society and what we wanted changed. . . . It was a tool for democratic struggle, a progressive lobby group, and open forum that was only forced underground by unnecessary crackdown’ (Oluoch, 2013).

Being forced to ‘keep quiet’ across generations fades many of these public memories and critical consciousnesses. By the early 1990s, for example, the term ‘mwakenya’ was used by some to refer not to the activists but, rather, to banned ‘crib’ booklets handmade by and circulated among high school students to peek at during midterm and final exams. In short, Moi’s admonishment to ‘keep quiet’ worked to snuff out memories of the progressive politics and calls for democracy that the movement had stood for. Today, many Kenyan youth are unfamiliar with these names, this history of resistance and the Mwakenya movement. As Nyairo writes: ‘nations are constructed by what they bury and forget, just as much as they are built on what they choose to remember’ (Nyairo, 2015, 69). Thus, we see here the need for knowledge infrastructures that go beyond housing official histories, and which also offer safe spaces for archiving and sharing histories of resistance and subversive politics. The legacy of Mwakenya is little talked about today. Nonetheless, as the re-emergence of the library collection of the Mwakenya in 2017 and the growth of the Ukombozi Library reading clubs (Box 13.4) symbolise, the Mwakenya legacy is not gone. The movement remains active, albeit less public and less widely known than in its early days.

#### **Box 13.4: Ukombozi Library**

To learn more about Ukombozi Library, visit the digital exhibit PALIAct Ukombozi Library (Okune, 2019a, <https://stsinfrastructures.org/content/paliact-ukombozi-library/essay>).

## **Decolonising libraries as progressive librarianship**

As alluded to in the previous section, in trying to understand what decolonised libraries in Kenya on their own terms might look like, there is a rich history of revolutionary and anti-colonial publishing in Kenya to turn to (Box 13.5). Crafting and practising decolonial ambitions for libraries and other knowledge infrastructures requires

#### **Box 13.5: Publishing in pre-independence Kenya**

In Durrani’s rich history of Kenyan publishing prior to achieving independence in 1963, he details a history of publishing in Kenya that is diverse and reaches back to the end of the 1800s, noting that although colonial laws prevented Kenya’s African population from owning printing presses or newspapers, that did not mean they lacked effective means of communication. Durrani spotlights the importance of oral communication systems and more fugitive methods in bypassing the embargo imposed by the colonial administration, such as writing ‘Kiswahili cha ndani’ (‘Kiswahili of the inside’) resistance messages on women’s khanga cloth, worn as skirts or wraps, so that the message reached a wide audience right in their homes. Durrani also points to the newspaper *Nyota ya Kirinyaga* = Kirinyaga’s Star (1949; 1951) to provide an example of the kinds of people who owned and ran the local radical press: ‘among the editors were one carpenter, a shoemaker, driver, sign writer, one book binder and several clerks, traders and farmers’ (Durrani, 2006, 191). However, this rich history of intellectual and activist social communication is at risk of being ‘forgotten’ (we use quote marks here to highlight the connection with the chapter’s earlier discussion of ‘forget and move on’, in which we described how this kind of ‘forgetting’ has been intentional and institutionalised).

developing greater connection to and knowledge of these histories. Shiraz Durrani, a Kenyan-British library professional and political activist forced into exile to the UK in 1986, has published several important pieces that help us begin to better understand this past. In a monograph analysing publishing and imperialism in Kenya from 1884 to 1963, Durrani described a shift in tactics as Mau Mau freedom fighters came to realise that, despite winning what Durrani referred to as ‘flag independence’ from the British colonialists, Kenyans had not acquired real liberation, land or freedom (Durrani, 2006, 235). Durrani reprinted the opening of an analysis penned collectively by Mau Mau analysts that had been widely distributed in the form of a pamphlet at the Kenya African National Union Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in December 1961, two years before the country was declared an independent nation. Recognising that the battle for independence had shifted from the military front to economic and political fronts, the Mau Mau writers articulated: ‘The struggle for Kenya’s future is being waged today on three distinct though interrelated levels: political, racial, and economic. It seems to us that we Africans are being allowed to “win” in the first two spheres as long as we don’t contest the battle being waged on the third, all-important, economic level’ (Durrani, 2006, 236).

The Mau Mau pamphlet noted that the neocolonial status of the country was that of continued economic control by the British government and the new imperialist power of the United States of America: ‘Put into slogan form, this plan would be: LEAVE IN ORDER TO STAY’ (Durrani, 2006, 236). ‘There is clear evidence of a calculated plan on the part of the economic elite to partially dissolve racial barriers in order to use Africans as frontmen and spokesmen for its interests ... “Africanisation” is the term used for the process ...’ (Durrani, 2006, 237). The pamphlet also critically assessed the concept of nationalism as a ‘negative philosophy’, no substitute for a ‘positive ideology’.

We use this sharp critique by the Mau Mau to build our own argument that decolonisation is a double bind – it must feel the weight of history as it struggles to move on. As we point to in the next section, despite being distinct and usually opposing forces, ‘forget and move on’, in practice, may look similar to ‘decolonising’. Thus, we seek to articulate a ‘decolonising’ that doesn’t forget. For that, we find inspiration in the Mau Mau vision for a Kenyan future. In the same 1961 pamphlet, they wrote:

‘Let us instead struggle against a “stability” which is in fact stagnation; let us struggle to liberate that vast reservoir of reactive ability which now lies dormant among our people; let us, in short, create a society which allows to each the right to eat, the right to the products of their labour, the right to clothe, house, and educate their children, the right in short to live in dignity among equals. It is a socialist society we should be struggling to build, a system which, unlike capitalism, concerns itself with the welfare of the masses rather than with the profits and privileges of a few.’

(Durrani, 2006, 237)

The real task for those interested in decolonising knowledge infrastructures, then, is in fact not really a question of what to forget. Instead, it is about developing alternative ideas and practices to address people's needs. The Mau Mau analysts stated:

'Let us then refashion an ideology which will unify the vast majority of our people by articulating their needs and by advancing a program of socialist development which promises to eradicate poverty, disease and illiteracy, a program which will draw out the creative talents and energies of our people, giving them that personal dignity and pride which comes from socially constructive and productive activity. Let us, in short, provide our people with the ideological and organisational tools necessary for the achievement of genuine independence and development.'

(Durrani, 2006, 237)

Durrani builds on these Mau Mau writings to develop the concept of 'progressive librarianship', which seeks to increase awareness among the people about their social, political and economic realities and the need for change from today's power relations. 'Progressive librarianship's great contribution to the development of theory and practice of librarianship is to re-establish the link between political and information struggles' (Durrani, 2014, 91).

## Book Bunk: practising progressive librarianship



**Figure 13.2:** *The entrance to McMillan Library's main branch, Nairobi, Kenya.*  
Photo credit: Angela Okune, taken March 2019

I (SM) have been engaged in work with Book Bunk Trust, a social impact trust founded in October 2017 by Wanjiru Koinange and Angela Wachuka. As part of our work, the team at Book Bunk have been tangibly working on how to materially and conceptually decolonise some of Nairobi's iconic public libraries, including the McMillan Library.

### The McMillan Library

Opened in 1931, the library (see Figure 13.2 on p. 199) was built by Lady Lucie McMillan as a memorial to her husband, US-born Sir Northrup McMillan, who died in 1925. The oldest library in Nairobi and the second-oldest in Kenya, it is the only building in Kenya protected by an Act of Parliament. In its first three decades the Library was limited to use by Europeans only. The Library was taken over by the Nairobi City Council in the lead-up to Kenyan independence in 1962, at which point it was opened up to the general public. Four additional branches were opened in subsequent years but today only two of these branches are functional – Eastlands and Kaloleni. In March 2018, Book Bunk formalised a partnership with the Nairobi City County that grants the organisation a mandate to lead restoration efforts and resource mobilisation for the libraries. Book Bunk's responsibilities include sourcing and management of fiscal and other support; steering and management of architectural restoration; and management of these public library spaces, including design and delivery of programming. Towards realising a dream that public Kenyan libraries can be steered to act as sites of knowledge production, shared experiences, cultural leadership and information exchange, the Book Bunk team has been tasked with key decisions about several aspects of the libraries. Some of these include whether or not to use the Dewey Decimal library classification system; the kinds of books to have in the library; and whether or not to un/rename the Library.

### What it means to decolonise the library

A core part of revitalising the libraries has revolved around what it means to decolonise the Library: 'When it was opened in 1931, this library was never intended for African users. So when it was handed over to the city, there was never an attempt to decolonise that quite purposefully. It is something that we are thinking quite deeply about, and it is a phenomenal amount of work,' the Book Bunk co-founders said in a documentary trailer (Okune, 2019b). For example, as we began cataloguing McMillan Library's many items in 2019, the Book Bunk team and I (SM) came across a rich photographic archive. It was stored in the Library's basement in a metal storage drawer, together with some glass-plate negatives in a vermin-infested metal crate. When we started combing through the archive, we came across photographs with captions that literally gave us shivers; for example, the photograph of the first institutional hanging, when Kenya was a British colony.

In 2020, after cataloguing all 137,705 items housed in the three libraries, Book Bunk created the first-ever digital catalogue of the libraries' collection and began digitising the

archive. This included newspapers, gazettes and photographs that constitute Kenya's cultural heritage and have suffered from neglect and climate damage. The collection includes reports of key historical events during Kenya's struggle for independence, such as the Mau Mau revolution, political assassinations, social and cultural developments, human rights movements and exploitative land-acquisition laws. Through this ongoing digitisation process, the Book Bunk team has had to figure out how to frame and contextualise aspects of this colonial and postcolonial national history. Digitising the photographic collection has been a way of making space for what has largely been a silenced history of Kenyan identity and struggle during the colonial period. As Coombes (2011) has noted, although many institutional public history exhibits are met with scrutiny and critique, the debates they foster are nevertheless often constructive and important. Recognising that we may encounter fraught topics and material, we nonetheless employ an approach similar to Mimi Onuoha's work, 'On Missing Datasets' (Onuoha, 2018). Onuoha's mixed media installation of a metal filing cabinet with labelled files that do not contain any data is, in her words, a 'visible physical repository of those things that have been excluded in a society where so much is collected' (Onuoha, 2018). She explained: 'The word "missing" is inherently normative. It implies both a lack and an ought: something does not exist, but it should. That which should be somewhere is not in its expected place; an established system is disrupted by distinct absence' (Onuoha, 2018). By creating a digitised archive of colonial newspapers, gazettes and photographs, Book Bunk looks to call attention to the missing perspectives, voices and faces – to think about what 'ought' to be there. This is what de Sousa Santos has called practising the sociology of absences: 'whatever does not exist in our society is often actively produced as non-existent and we have to look into that reality' (de Sousa Santos, 2016, 21). If, as Onuoha writes, 'spots that we've left blank reveal our hidden social biases and indifferences', then Book Bunk seeks to make these materials available for public critique to inoculate against a public culture of 'forget and move on'. By analysing what has been left silent in colonial Kenyan histories and grappling with it through these physical and now digital materials, we seek to support a Kenyan public capacity for critical consciousness. This is a key role we see progressive libraries playing a part in. Part of figuring out ways to cultivate such critical consciousness is also a question of how to build a technical infrastructure for it; for example, ensuring metadata and critical commentary accompany each artefact so that it is experienced contextually. There are important ongoing lessons and work to be learned from those working on civic community archive development and its software development (cf. Fortun et al., 2021; Christen, 2011).

## Shaping the collection

In libraries across the world, 'weeding' refers to a practice conducted periodically where books which are considered misleading, beyond physical repair, superseded (a newer edition is available), trivial (information can be found elsewhere) or otherwise unfit for a particular collection are removed from the library. After completing the digital catalogue

in 2019, in 2020 Book Bunk embarked on weeding the Library's collection, which spanned 90 years. A question that continually resurfaces is what to do with all the books that write in a racist way about Kenyans and Africans. For example, in John Harris's *Dawn in Darkest Africa* (1912), British colonialism is exalted as a service to the 'primitive natives' of the African continent. The book's introduction praised Harris as 'having acquired a firm grasp of the main principles which should guide Europeans who are called upon to rule over a backward and primitive society' (Harris, 1912). Should such works be weeded from the collection entirely? How should a progressive library support critical awareness about scientific racism and racist imperialism, both past and present, while also promoting and opening space for Kenyan narratives and forms of self-expression that seek to move out of these over-determined frames? How do we move on and not forget? One of the ways Book Bunk is working around this is by updating the library's acquisitions and collections policy so that it does three primary things. First, the new collection housed in the McMillan Libraries is to be chosen by the public based on their own needs. We (SM) do this by asking library users who sign in daily to also write in their desired additions to our library collection. We prioritise new acquisitions based on user demographics in the different branches and have curated a wish list of books that are available through local bookstores. Kenyans around the city have begun to purchase these books for McMillan Library users from the available online list and we have now begun to receive monthly drop-offs of new books.

Using a similar approach, library events and programming are crowdsourced from the Kenyan public themselves. In 2019, Book Bunk solicited proposals for public events (examples can be seen at [www.bookbunk.org/programmes/past-programmes](http://www.bookbunk.org/programmes/past-programmes)) to be held at the Library. We (SM) received 66 applications and eventually selected 12. Each group was given both cash and in-kind support to run its proposed event at one of the library branches, helping to push forward a vision of the Library as a public space of art, memory, cultural heritage and knowledge production. Second, the predominant voices in the library collection are to be Kenyan and African authors writing about the people and the region (Box 13.6). We (SM) are currently working on an acquisitions and collection policy that details how we hope to promote bibliodiversity (Shearer et al., 2020) in the collection, including authors and genres that we intentionally prioritise. And third, Book Bunk will use the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) and other library cataloguing systems as inspiration for our own classification system that serves the needs of a modern Nairobi library more intuitively. Most libraries use the Dewey Decimal system, but the Glasgow Women's Library, who mentor the Book Bunk team, created their own classification system inspired by Indian feminists calling for the creation of alternative classification systems (Gandhi, 1995) that were less hierarchical and more inclusive of women's affairs.

**Box 13.6: Languages in the McMillan Library collection**

While there are over 40 spoken languages in Kenya, English and Kiswahili are the main languages of speech and writing. As such, most texts in the library will be written in English and Kiswahili, but the collection will also have books of other East African languages.

Drawing inspiration from this example, Book Bunk, too, is in the processes of developing its own classification scheme.

## Progressive librarianship

McMillan Libraries are just one of a diverse ecology of libraries in Kenya and are certainly not the only ones that can be read as attempting to practise progressive librarianship. PALIAct Ukombozi Library, as another example, is explicitly founded by Shiraz Durrani, Kimani Waweru and others on the very principles of progressive librarianship. Durrani (2014) describes these efforts in detail in his book, *Progressive Librarianship*. By framing the decolonising work being done at McMillan Libraries as also working towards progressive librarianship, we seek to promote the idea that there is great heterogeneity in the libraries' attempting decolonisation. Instead of decolonisation as the goal in and of itself, greater collective attention to articulations of a public information system that meets the needs of the Kenyan working people is needed. As Durrani wrote: 'What was progressive a hundred years ago will not necessarily be progressive today; what is progressive in Kenya today may not necessarily be progressive in Britain today. The essence of progressiveness is that it is dynamic and changes with changing circumstances. Every revolution needs a relevant information system to ensure success' (Durrani, 2014, 50).

A diverse ecosystem of libraries, archives, digital repositories, and scholarly communities in conversation with each other and constantly reassessing information needs of Kenyan citizens is important because local collaborations, transnational alliances and an articulation of shared values and principles help to fortify against the commercial encroachment of digital knowledge commons which, as we detail in the next section, we have begun to observe in the Kenyan digital cultural heritage space.

## Limiting decolonial possibilities: commercial dominance of the digital layer

In an October 2020 video message, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta stated:

We must look for our common vision in the dreams of our ancestors. We must seek out their wisdom and preserve their memory. We must bring them to life in a way that present generations can relate – through technology. You can begin that journey by visiting the National Museums of Kenya page on the Google Arts and Culture platform to learn the stories of our folk and cultural heroes, relive their experiences and draw the inspiration that you need from them in order to play your part in constructing and exemplifying our national ethos.

(Itimu, 2020)

What does it mean when Kenyan youth are advised to turn to Google for the dreams of their ancestors? In this section we attend to the political economy of global knowledge infrastructure, pointing out the risks of increasing privatisation of digital knowledge



commons by private corporations. Given the deep history of Kenyan resistance that we have briefly sketched, as well as the disinvestment in public memory and knowledge infrastructures enacted by the austerity programmes of structural adjustment, those who care about decolonised libraries must also care about protecting their public ownership. If we believe in the importance of progressive librarianship and scholarly knowledge for a vibrant civil society and public life, then we must pay attention not only to the physical structures and material content of libraries and archives, but also to the digital systems that structure how this knowledge is indexed, accessed, promoted and stored. The vertical integration of services provided by foreign corporate actors like Facebook and Google has far-reaching consequences for network sovereignty and (un)democratic control of digital infrastructures (Nothias, 2020). Toussaint Nothias (2020) has described how, despite often critiquing these foreign companies, civil society organisations find themselves increasingly reliant on the digital platforms run by the very same corporations, not to mention the explicit partnerships and philanthropic funding linked to tech industry fortunes. This makes resistance to such corporate projects particularly challenging, especially when the government, as evidenced in the section's opening quotation, is also in close collaboration with these corporations.

An approach of 'forget and move on' towards Kenyan national events has led to the normalisation of state incompetence and a distrust of its narratives and systems, fertile grounds for technology corporations to offer their 'free' services. Simultaneous with work by concerned Kenyans to reinvigorate libraries as open spaces for diverse publics, there have also been growing investments by technology corporations into these spaces, which we believe warrant critical attention from scholars, journalists and activists. A culture of 'forget and move on' has had debilitating effects not only on national memory but also on the actors seen as trustworthy and capable of managing and stewarding Kenya's past, present and future. Acknowledging this loss of trust in public systems and their agents is imperative for understanding the barriers to overcoming what Paulin Hountondji (1990) has labelled 'extroverted scientific activity', where scholarly work advances the theoretical needs and questions of the Western academy but does not serve the societies within which science is conducted. Individuals and library organisations alike, all of us, are increasingly caught within systems of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) that establish dependencies that are hard to get out of and which reduce the possibilities of bibliodiversity (Shearer et al., 2020) and epistemic justice (Albornoz, Okune and Chan, 2020). Big tech, controlling the library, archive or data repository and mining its contents, would have us believe that they are best placed to reveal trends in data, from culture and thought to potential future pandemics. However, recent work by scholars of the archive reminds us to question the broad implications of technology corporations' investments in large-scale determination of knowledge. We add to these ongoing conversations by suggesting that without addressing the enduring imperial legacies that continue today in current established postcolonial knowledge infrastructures, there is no way to 'move on'. In an environment where funding is limited and government support is thin, libraries and

archives are in an increasingly tight spot to come up with the funds to stay open and develop services such as digitisation of archives. When funding or in-kind support is offered, it is difficult to turn down corporate actors, many of whom seem very well intentioned. But we must reflect on the autonomy and decision-making power that is sacrificed when mega-corporations begin to get involved.

We take no issue with the President's sentiments that Kenyan youth can draw inspiration from the revolutionary leaders of the last 50 years; in fact, we are in full agreement. However, we do question why, instead of promoting and recognising, for example, the important efforts by Chao Tayiana at African Digital Heritage and the Museum of British Colonialism, Wairimu Nduba's work at WerJoKenya or Mwhiki Muraguri's work with Paukwa – to mention just a few – rather, the head of state called for citizens to turn to a multinational American company with a business model centred on data extraction. In light of this, supporting the organising of people and alternative socio-technical infrastructures that can enable digital humanities, archiving, artistic and scholarly experimentation for public interest appears as an important, growing role for Kenyan progressive libraries.

## Conclusion

In the closing shots of a corporate marketing video, a thin, young Black woman looks straight into the camera, raises her fist and states resolutely: 'Forwards Ever, Backwards Never.' The video, from ThoughtWorks, a technology design company, is embedded in a company blog post titled 'Using Technology to Drive Change in Africa' (Rao et al., 2015) and talks about the company's relationship to the continent. 'Our vision for Pan Africa is that in five years' time, ThoughtWorks will have catalysed the development of accessible software-driven-technologies coded in Africa, for Africa, by diverse African teams,' the post states. However, five years down the line, the company no longer has any physical presence on the continent, having closed both of its Africa-based offices – one in Uganda and the other in South Africa. Its headquarters in Europe and North America remain open and active. The closure of ThoughtWorks' African offices is joined by more recent closures of technology start-up SafeBoda (Ayugi, 2020) and Google's Loon project (Wakabayashi, 2021), rendering void any illusion of a technologically driven linear progress narrative. Bestowing foreign technology companies – many of whom have quickly left once capital and profits dried up – with the country's 'roots', that is, historical artefacts and national memory, is an incredible risk. Even if external partners have the best intentions, their activities can be experienced as extractive if care is not taken to invest in strengthening local systems in the places where these materials were first created. All knowledge infrastructures reinforce authority, power and control (Acker, 2020; Dourish and Bell, 2007) and require upkeep, care and maintenance (Martin, Myers and Viseu, 2015; Murphy, 2014). Rather than putting Kenyan youth to work sweeping streets and

digging trenches to ‘keep busy’ (Box 13.7), what if young people were instead mentored to contribute to, learn about and steward Kenya’s knowledge infrastructure?

**Box 13.7: State programmes of youth employment**

State programmes designed to create employment for Kenyan youth have come in cycles, initiated with pomp and promise (and big budgets), only to end in scandal and missing funds and then to be resurrected again under a different name. For example, in March 2011, the government’s Kazi Kwa Vijana initiative (with 4.3 billion Kenyan shillings allocated by the World Bank) was launched and aimed at creating 300,000 jobs countrywide. But barely six months later, claims of corruption and unaccounted for funds halted the programme (Aseka, 2011). Similarly, a 2018 scandal over 791 million Kenyan shillings (7.65 million USD) went missing as part of contracts associated with the Kenya National Youth Service (NYS) (BBC, 2018). The NYS continues to be plagued by corruption scandals (Mukii, 2021). Most recently, in 2020, *Kazi Mtaani* (which loosely translates to ‘Neighbourhood Employment’ in Swahili/Sheng) was launched and allocated 10 billion Kenyan shillings (91.2 million USD) to provide jobs to young people (Kinyanjui, 2020). Public criticism over the kinds of menial work being offered has surfaced in online spaces (see, for example, the satirical video <https://twitter.com/i/status/1298924063570702336> circulated on Twitter).

The latest youth employment scheme programme has been critiqued for offering menial work to Kenyan youth.

Kenyan philosopher Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o wrote: ‘Memory is the link between the past and the present, between space and time, and it is the base of our dreams’ (Thiong’o, 2009, 28). If, as Ngũgĩ writes, ‘[m]emory and consciousness are inseparable’ (Thiong’o, 2009, 29), given this chapter’s exploration of Kenya’s contested approach towards national memory and proclivity to outsource knowledge infrastructure, what are the implications for Kenyan consciousness? What kind of knowledge infrastructures, particularly libraries and archives, are needed if Kenyans are to (continue to) speak truth to power and rekindle and ignite consciousness not just in this generation but in generations to come? Here feminist historian of science and technology Michelle Murphy adds: ‘the past as archive or as trauma is not what has already happened but instead a potential that can be variously actualized in the becoming of the future’ (Murphy, 2014).

Going back to the paradox of the lion’s head – what to remember and forget in attempts to decolonise – and layering this with contemporary and historical events that circle around questions of value and profiting from knowledge, it is clear that what to remember and what to forget is tied directly to the capabilities and ownership of the technical infrastructure. We cannot expect to retain a critical perspective of imperial formations if the very infrastructure itself is owned and bound up in that same hegemonic imperial power. The question of decolonising knowledge, then, is also one of decoupling from infrastructures owned by private Euro-American corporations. ‘The need is for working people to own and control magazines and book publishing so as to reflect the world from their point of view,’ Ukombozi Library founders Shiraz Durrani and Kimani

Waweru (Durrani, 2014; Durrani, Waweru and Kitchen, 2017) have suggested, reflecting on their experience and motivation for Ukombozi Library.

In this chapter we have shed light on what we characterise as an approach of ‘forget and move on’ towards national memory. Moving on instead of grappling with and bringing to account the injustices and wrongs carried out at particular moments in Kenyan history leads to an increasingly disillusioned and cynical public who do not trust public narratives or expect much from state institutions. Instead, citizens as well as the Kenyan state turn to external actors, outsourcing, for example, core knowledge infrastructures to foreign companies, including, most recently, national archival and library content to American technology multinational, Google. This has brought us to a contemporary moment where the President allocated 91 million USD to pay Kenyan youth to sweep the streets and dig trenches and advises them to turn to Google to learn about their ancestors.

If we are to truly stay with the discomfort of decolonising knowledge infrastructures, a first step is to develop and support community-owned systems, bringing together diverse people thinking and working on these issues. We do not need to know the answer in order to grasp that we must imagine and build something different together. We have no wish to simply replay the trauma and violence of imperialism over and over again, potentially overdetermining any kind of radical future imaginary. But by developing an understanding of colonialism’s epistemic formations, we can better track its remnants and new formulations as they continue into the present and future. Instead of a culture of ‘forget and move on’, which does not in fact get us any closer to epistemic justice, we believe in the importance of infrastructuring and strengthening the connections that support those aspiring for decolonial knowledge through progressive librarianship to pay attention to existing oppressive systems and begin to imagine new modes of redress and freedom.

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