



# RECLAIMING ONE'S STORIES: BOOK BUNK REINVENTS NAIROBI'S PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A VIBRANT SET OF LIBRARIES IS EMERGING IN NAIROBI, KENYA. TURNING ONCE SEGREGATED SPACES INTO PALACES FOR THE PEOPLE, THEY PROVIDE ACCESS TO LITERATURE THAT REFLECTS THE CULTURAL RICHNESS AND DIVERSITY OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICA. UNDER THE DYNAMIC LEADERSHIP OF ANGELA WACHUKA AND WANJIRU KOINANGE, BOOK BUNK IS IMPLEMENTING A VISION OF LIBRARIES AS DYNAMIC EDUCATIONAL AND COMMUNITY CENTERS. THEY HAVE ALREADY CAREFULLY REIMAGINED TWO SMALL NAIROBI LIBRARIES AND DIGITIZED COLONIAL AND HISTORICAL RECORDS AT A THIRD, THE VENERABLE MCMILLAN MEMORIAL LIBRARY. THEY'VE EVEN GATHERED LARGE DIGITAL AUDIENCES FOR LIVELY LITERARY FESTIVALS. ON THE CUSP OF THE PHYSICAL RENOVATION OF THE MCMILLAN, BOOK BUNK IS ON THE MOVE.

Kenya continues in inspiring ways to expunge the residue of its colonial past, during which native Kenyans experienced significant limitations on access to their own lands. Starting in the 1920's, Nairobi was

divided into sections - upscale Westlands, reserved for British settlers, and Eastlands, the section of the city set aside for the rest of the population. In 1931, Lady Lucie McMillan erected the McMillan Memorial Library



in Westlands, as a tribute to her late, American born husband. The library's style was fitting for the British Empire, both architecturally and in terms of collections. As a consolation for the magnificent McMillan being available only to colonial residents, several smaller libraries emerged in Eastlands - although not until 1962, in the lead up to Kenya's independence.

### A TIME CAPSULE

Having outgrown smaller venues like Nairobi's bars and restaurants for their literary festivals, publisher Angela Wachuka and writer Wanjiru Koinange set out on a scouting mission in 2012, which took them to the McMillan Memorial Library. Entering the building, the future founders of Book Bunk discovered a space that had scarcely changed since it was opened in 1931. "It felt like we had stepped into a time capsule. Somehow the rest of Nairobi had grown and changed dynamically, but the library had remained much like it was during the time of British colonial rule," describes Ms. Wachuka.

### THE EMPIRE GIVES BACK

The moment would echo in their minds until Ms. Koinange received a commission from Commonwealth Writers - the cultural initiative of the Commonwealth Foundation - which inspires and connects writers and storytellers across the world. Wanjiru Koinange decided to study Nairobi's McMillan Library and started interviewing everyone involved, from librarians to community members.

"We learned that the McMillan originally had four satellites and that two still remained in Eastlands, the only section of Nairobi where 'Black Africans' could live and work under imperial rule."

### TIME FOR A CHANGE

Empowered with the body of interviews, Ms. Wachuka and Ms. Koinange launched the Book Bunk Trust, a social impact enterprise. It was time for Nairobi's libraries to serve their communities - not just with book collections reflecting the literary vibrancy of the African continent, but also as true centers for the community.

"In October 2017, we approached the local authorities with our data and asked how we could partner. It was an unusual request, but by April 2018, we had an agreement," explains Ms. Wachuka, a 2019-2020 Obama Foundation Leader: Africa.

### PALACES FOR THE PEOPLE

With their municipal authorization in hand, Book Bunk started interviewing Eastlands residents and library users about their vision for the libraries. In their minds, public libraries should be more than just repositories - they should act as sites of knowledge, shared experiences, cultural leadership and information exchange.

Book Bunk continues the tradition of literary festivals which brought its founders together. In their 2021 festival called "Writing African Cities," New York University's Eric Klinenberg, author of *Palaces for the People*, and Kenyan social scientist Dr. Wangui Kimari, discussed the politics of exclusion and the role of public spaces. Throughout the festival, the significant role which libraries play in inspiring communities and developing new talent was highlighted.

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**"GIVING THROUGH THEM HAS ALLOWED ME TO INCREASE MY DONATIONS TO BOOK BUNK, A WONDERFUL LIBRARY RESTORATION EFFORT IN KENYA."**  
**BROOKS WASHINGTON**

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"Book Bunk is now part of the economic ecology of the community. We create employment opportunities. We hire qualified individuals and invite them to join our team, and whenever we can, we take the time to train local community members into positions," recounts Ms. Wachuka.



### **A LIVING ENCYCLOPEDIA**

With the pandemic shutdowns in 2020 and 2021, Book Bunk worked full speed ahead to complete the physical renovation of the first two libraries. In the same period, they received the authorization to take over the management of the "Mothership," the venerable McMillan, discovering that its collections were in complete disarray. "In nine months, with an army of 30 student interns, we turned a Dewey decimal card catalog into a digital catalog of 140,000 books," explains Ms. Wachuka.

"We found unique historical records sitting in mold in the basement, so we began a process of creating a digitized archive for over 50,000 items. With these now online, Book Bunk has recently launched a project crowd-sourcing comments from Kenyans who wish to share their impressions about these colonial documents. These will then be added to the platform. In fact, we are creating a sort of living encyclopedia about our collective past," Ms. Wachuka explains with the joyful smile of a leader who sees the impact of her vision.

### **90 YEAR SALUTE**

In October 2021, Book Bunk celebrated the 90th anniversary of the McMillan Library with the launching of its inaugural NBO Litfest - a free virtual festival anchored in Nairobi's public libraries and featuring stories and ideas emerging from Nairobi and other regional spaces.

"The event put a spotlight on what a public library can and should be - a space for art, for culture, and for knowledge production. We want to challenge the idea of libraries as quiet spaces. Book Bunk aims to bring libraries alive," says Ms. Wachuka.

### WISH LISTS AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

Through creative collaborations, Book Bunk is rebalancing the collections of its two Eastlands libraries. Its team announced a 'wish list for books' from which individuals and corporations can select titles to purchase in local bookstores, to be donated to the libraries. Book Aid International, the UK's leading international book donation and library development charity, have also partnered with Book Bunk to provide contemporary book collections.

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**"WE'RE TRANSFORMING NAIROBI -  
ONE LIBRARY AT A TIME."  
WANJIRU KOINANGE**

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"However, turning outdated libraries into vibrant community centers requires more than books. We also need financial resources," remarks Ms. Wachuka.

"Our Board members and other individual donors provide much needed monetary and other support, working with us to mobilize resources by connecting us to fundraising opportunities. That will be especially useful going forward, as on the horizon is the righting of the Mothership - the planned physical upgrade of the McMillan.

### SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS OVERSEAS

As Book Bunk Trust started fundraising online, they went searching for options to receive contributions from U.S. donors and decided to work with the giving platform provided by KBFUS. "We are so grateful to our Board. They were instrumental in establishing the Friends of Book Bunk Trust at KBFUS. And they understand that it's not solely about purchasing books - sometimes we need to pay for shelves, and we have

to cover our staff members' salaries as well," explains Angela Wachuka. "KBFUS provides a great platform to support impactful projects in Africa. And giving through them has allowed me to increase my donations to Book Bunk, a wonderful library restoration effort in Kenya," adds donor Brooks Washington.

Book Bunk's connection with KBFUS has benefited its work in multiple ways, says Angela Wachuka. KBFUS not only facilitates the easy transfer of U.S. donations to the Kenyan nonprofit. The foundation's staff has also acted as a sounding partner for how Book Bunk can continue to develop its fundraising efforts. Being part of the KBFUS family gives Book Bunk Trust another home in the world, an alliance where the importance of its mission is both appreciated and understood.

**bookbunk.org**

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