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### The Library: A Tiny Seed of Stories That Cultivated My Literacy

It's summer in Òyó State, Nigeria where I grew up. I already knew what that meant. As the rooster crows in my backyard of our home, I take it as my alarm to get myself out of bed and get dressed. My mum is getting ready as well; it's time for her to go to work. I watch as she puts on her well-starched and ironed white uniform. She pins her Flossie cap on to her gelled hair. I am excited to get out of school and go to work with her but also, most importantly, to visit my happy place: the òkè-òròkí Library next to the clinic where she worked.

“Shó ti mu rá tan, ká ló o” my mum said, which in Yoruba translates to “Are you done getting dressed? Let's go.”

I opened the gate to our house and handed over the padlock to my grandma so she could lock up after us. My little self was eager to go into the library and read another story book.

“Which one will I find today?” I'd ask myself.

The thirty minute or so drive always felt so short because I wasn't thinking about the drive there, but my destination. As scenes of motorcyclists and street hawkers flashed outside the window, I barely noticed. My thoughts were preoccupied with dreams of the endless genre of books that I could find at the community library.

When we arrived at her workplace, I helped my mom by carrying her handbag inside, as that was my Job. I speed-walked in because every single second counted. I had about eight hours to read as many books as I wanted. I said “Hello!” to everyone that happened to be working on that day because, in my culture, it’s respectful to acknowledge every single person present at a particular place. After the requisite greetings, I could finally go to the library.

It was a giant, white concrete edifice right across from a public school. A huge arc pillar marked the entrance. However, due to how old the library was, coupled with the fact that it was located in the rural part of town, the once-pearly white architecture was now covered in clay soil and dust. It was a community space but that’s not what it seemed like to me. To me, it was my world and everyone else at the library just happened to exist in it. I remember the big book for record keeping that was always at the entrance and the blue inked pen that accompanied it. Didn’t hesitate to write my full name in it, my house address, and my mum’s phone number as I did not have one at the time. At last, I’m in!

I made my way to the kid’s section, the map of the library embedded in my memory. The rest of the library didn’t matter to me. All I ever think about is the kids’ section with all the picture books, poems, rhymes, story books, fantasies, and magic. The set up of the kid’s section was a set of four to six golden brown wooden chairs and a squared table of the same color to the center of them. The room was surrounded by numerous bookshelves. It wasn’t the biggest space since it was the kid’s section, but that did not matter to me at the time. When you’re small, such spaces seem vast. There was a giant window that served as a source of natural lighting towards the back of the room. I grabbed my book, whatever matched what the vibe was for the day. Selections ranged from *The Lion King* to *Cinderella* to *Pinocchio*, written in English as well as folktales in my mother tongue. These stories included “Mọremí Àjàsorò” the tale of a courageous queen that saved her kingdom from enemies, “Ìjápá àti Ehoró” which was the same tale as “The Tortoise and the Hare” but written in Yoruba, and many other books that I can’t recall. This is where I spent every single minute of my mum’s shift.

My mother sent one of her nursing apprentices to get me for lunch because she knew I would not come of my own volition, even if I felt hungry. There were so many apprentices as this was a nursing facility where they often rotate nurses with other facilities in the same council. Obscured by the patina of time, it's hard to put names to the faces, but the dialogue was consistent amongst all of them.

“Mommy ẹ n pè ẹ pé kó wá jẹun ọsán” said the apprentice in clinic scrubs, which directly translates to “your mom calls for you, to come eat lunch.”

“Mo n bo, ẹ jẹkín ka eléyí ń” I replied, which loosely translates to “I’ll be there, let me finish this page/this book.”

But they knew to wait for me so that I would reluctantly get up and follow them back to the clinic. They knew if they left me behind, I would just keep on reading. When I got to the clinic, I tried to finish my lunch as fast as I could while keeping my eyes on my book. I ate my lunch hurriedly so that I could head right back to the library, but I would not let go of the book I was reading.

That memory of my younger self remains with me today: a little black girl about ten years of age sitting in her mother’s break lounge with a book on the table next to her lunch, hurriedly stuffing her face with food, eyes skimming the pages as if in a haste...which I was, I was in a haste to head back to the library. After lunch, I’d rush back to the library to exchange my lunch-book with a new title. And then I’d spend the rest of my time there until I realized that my mum’s shift is wrapping up.

Come closing time, my mum drove to the front of the library to pick me up. Occasionally she would send an apprentice to retrieve me. If I ever felt unsatisfied with where I was in a story line, I’d check out the book alongside others that interested me. The

librarians did not have to worry about me because they knew I'd be back. I often leave the library with at least four books so that I am sure I had enough books to last me through the weekend. The pile of book jostled around in my arms, their weight shifting with every stride as I ran towards my mom's car. That was how I spent most of my summer growing up. This experience alongside my education has made it possible for me to become very fluent in English. I also developed impeccable reading skills as well even though I grew up in a home where Yoruba was the native and main language. English was only spoken once in a while or when necessary.

Sometimes, now that I live in the United States, I get comments like “your English is so good,” and “how did you learn English?” Those comments often come off as a bit passive aggressive to me because people get surprised that someone from an African country speaks English fluently and is well educated, at least for my age. However, it reminds me that all of my childhood spent reading – a pastime that for some might seem like a silly little hobby – has paid off. I am always happy to prove ignorant people wrong about any stereotypes of my country that they need to unlearn. I give all credit to my mom and the òkè-òròkí library for representing one of the early and iconic factors that fostered my literacy.