On the Reading Culture

Accept greetings from Canada and my sincere apologies as I cannot be present at this very important event that has to do with our community, and especially on the subject of knowledge.

I want to congratulate Kemomo Foundation and the Kenya National Library Services for on this great idea of holding a Community Reading Tent. It underlines the two organizations’ commitment to community development. It is a cause worthy of everyone’s support. Yes, all of us.

As you all know, information and knowledge form the foundation of any development. It has been predicted that it is knowledge societies that will thrive in the future; it means that we need to keep up in order to be competitive in the global village in which we live today. Reading is the surest way to do so.

Accordingly, it is our duty to continually seek knowledge that would keep us informed; and indeed make us become better informed over time. That way, we can make informed choices in facing life challenges; challenges that could be complex or mundane.

We are here for a reading session and a chance to promote reading in our community. The obvious question is: why we need to read? A supplementary question is: when do we stop reading? Once we write examinations? Or should there be an end to reading?

In view of that, I am going to highlight a few benefits of reading and why learning is a life-long endeavour. In doing so, I will point to practical ways in which reading improves our lives, be it as an individual, community or society.

Reading is a livelong endeavour that brings many, many benefits to us, as individuals, and the society in which we live. It is one reason that I am involved in a publishing venture (Nsemia Inc, Publishers) whose aim is to help capture, record, share and transmit knowledge for today’s society and beyond. Appropriately, we would like to bring to others the many untold stories of our experiences as individual, community and society in which we live. Out of reading our stories and the stories of other people, and by other people reading our stories, we arrive at a better understanding of each other and hence have a better world environment for all of us.

Egesomo Tikeri Kong’ainia

Reading develops our minds, enriches our lives and the lives of those that are around us. When we read, we share someone’s and other people’s perspectives; and these perspectives add to our knowledge base and enhances our view of the world. Remember Mogusii said that “egesomo nigo kegokinia, tikeri kong’ainia”. When we read, we have a chance to “travel” into someone else’s environment, and space, get their thinking and thus enrich our view of things around us and the world. In the process we become better enlightened, educated and smarter than before.

---

1 Speech to participants of Reading Tent convened by Kemomo Foundation and Kenya National Library Services in Nyamira Town, November 22, 2011
There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why... I dream of things that never were, and ask why not? – Robert F.Kennedy, US Attorney General and Presidential Candidate.

Reading opens new horizons and exposes us to new ways of doing things; through such exposure we can ask why things happen the way they and why they cannot be different.

It is through knowledge that we appreciate new breeds of cows that produce more milk than what used to be our tradition breed; it is through knowledge that we have learnt to plant crops that have a higher yield than what we used to get before. Indeed, it is knowledge that allows us to question on a continuing basis, whether things cannot be better.

Some American Proverbs

Half a brain is too much for him who says little.

We need brain more than belly food.

Brain is worth more than brawn.

Where there are no brains, there is no feeling.

The less the brains, the bigger the hat.

You can borrow brains, but you can't borrow character.

Reading develops the mind and the brain. As we read, we think, we consider and we reason about the stories we are reading. In doing so, we exercise our minds and make them more sound. Just as your body needs physical exercise and nutrition, your mind and brain need such nourishment. And reading is the means the mind and brain’s nourishment. Reading is the caring and feeding of the mind.

Indeed, as the American proverb above says: we need brains more than belly food! Have brains, you will get food; an undeveloped brain will result in stunted development.

“No human being, when you understand his desires, is worthless. No one's life is nothing. Even the most evil of men and women, if you understand their hearts, had some generous act that redeems them, at least a little, from their sins.” - Orson Scott Card, Speaker for the Dead

We can also learn lessons from reading the experiences of others, experiences that we can then relate to our situations. Through such reading we learn the lessons of history so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Through such reading we can understand our culture better and how it impacts us and those around us. Through reading and sharing we can reason about what is useful practice versus what is not. That way, we can better adopt what is useful to us rather than continue harmful practices.

Or how about the practice depicted by the school teacher in Okemwa The Gong (from Nsemia Inc Publishers) that speaks of a retired teacher, and his predicament; wondering how come he trains...
people that do better while he is expecting dowry for his daughters that is not coming and while challenged to meet maternity fees for his 4th wife in hospital?

What can we learn from that retired school teacher and his predicament?

_Amandegere Name Getembe, Ore N’abamura Nayae_

In the late 1800 Sakagwa, the foremost seer among Abagusii said that “amandegere name Getembe, ore nabamura nayae” – loosely translating to “mushroom will bloom at Getembe and only those with strong men/warriors would benefit from the harvest”. Getembe is present day Kisii Town, with skyscrapers coming up and a hub of commerce in Gusii.

Different people have given different interpretations of this saying. However, from my reading and discussions with people, he meant that things were changing in traditional Gusii and Getembe, especially, will be that scene of change: of the economics of the day and that only those that are prepared, that have the means and ability would benefit; means and ability here is symbolized by young men, that typify strength, stamina and virility.

Today, we have challenges in Kenya of there being not enough jobs for our people; in Gusii, especially, the problem is dire. Our continual search for solutions must be based on expanded knowledge and applying this knowledge to improve our lot.

_Ore na semi asemie oyomwabo_

Reading improves our vocabulary and hence allows us to communicate with other people; it also helps us understand and learn from other people. Effective communication allows us to work better with others through ongoing dialogue. In this respect, every Kenyan needs to be literate to better understand what goes around us; and what other Kenyans are saying. A good example is the new constitution and what it will mean for us as individuals, constituencies, counties and the nation. Understand what exists in the new order, will allow us to play a better role in shaping the destiny of our community and nation.

A further example is our ethnic relationships. I believe that if we talked more with our Kalenjin, Luo and Maasai neighbours, understood each other better, we would not fight futile wars as happened following the elections of 2007. We have to expand our knowledge of fellow Kenyans in order to better work together towards common destiny.

Moreover, across Kenya, and especially in Gusii, we need to broaden our world-view, enhance our broad understanding of issues so that we can better deal with our challenges. My appeal, especially for the young people, is that they can make a difference to our nation if they broaden understanding of the world around us. I suggest that such understanding would make us put clanism in its place (avoiding genetic-related disorders because of marriage among relatives rather than a unit of political organization), corruption in its place (it should have no place), and learn to embrace values like integrity and values of caring, empathy and sense of community.
Ensinyo manakobengwa ‘mbamura etabwati

Reading is a confidence builder as well. People that know, understand and can communicate what they know are often more confident saying what they know, in the words they understand them and thus may help them attain their objectives.

In our community and country we need leaders that can stand up for common good; but they cannot emerge without standing on sound knowledge base. Extensive understanding of community, national and global issues requires extensive reading, discussions and search for answers.

Telling our own stories

Reading will also open our minds and the desire to write our stories. This is a matter dear to me because often people write about us; they do so using their own coloured lenses. Just go to Europe or America or Japan to see how Africa is represented. And it is portrayed so by people with little or no understanding of who we are, what we are and our destiny on this earth.

If we are going to counter the negative images of us in the world; if we are going to be respected as bona fide players in this global village, we need our stories in the open. And these must be written by us, in our own understanding and the way we see ourselves.

I want to challenge those attending this reading tent to go back home, take pen and paper and start writing their stories, their experiences and more. Remember mogano 'ngocha ‘nde? that used to be the norm before people went to bed. In those days we could tell animal stories, many of which had lessons for life. Recall Tortoise and Hare? Or Hare and Elephant? And many more stories. Such stories are our heritage that we would give to the global village; and they offer lessons that the world will benefit from.

My challenge to you is write these; send them to us and we shall consider publishing them; it will be our legacy passed to future generations.

Conclusion

Reading is food and exercise to the mind; the benefits are for the individual, community and society. Reading allows for personal growth and hence generates the chance of good outcomes with respect to challenges we may face.

And just as we nourish the body every day, we need to do the same for the brain and mind.

I wish you well in the events of Community Reading Tent. Let me hope that this is the beginning and that there will be such tents in the future and not just in Nyamira Town but across the county, Gusii and the entire Kenya. It is an initiative that we at Nsemia Inc Publishers support today and in the future.

See you soon; and may the Lord bless you and ensure the success this endeavours.