

Libraries creating reading material for rural children readers in Burkina Faso

Michael Kevane

Dept. of Economics, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA

mkevane@scu.edu

and

Director, West Africa, Friends of African Village Libraries (FAVL)

San Jose, CA

www.favl.org



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Abstract:

This paper discusses the growing concern in Africa over reading habits and reading culture from the point of view of small rural community libraries, striving to promote reading. The experience of Friends of African Village Libraries (FAVL) has been that young readers respond very positively to locally-produced books that feature local people and themes. Realizing this, FAVL has experimented successfully with two initiatives. The first is the production of photo books, printed through fastpencil.com. The second is the establishment of a small media center in the town of Houndé, where a production team uses scanner and laser printers to produce pamphlet-style books. Both kinds of books are widely read in the community libraries of the region.

Keywords: Reading, book production, Africa, photo books.

1. Introduction

The primary function and public service of public libraries, even today in the digital age, is to promote reading. For libraries to serve the reading public, they must have collections that will interest readers. In many situations, it is not enough to passively accept the books available from publishers and book donation programs. As with schools, the staff of public libraries and the organizations that support public libraries have to be attentive to the creation of content (Amaral and Rosenberg 2000).

Creation of original content that reflects local culture is especially important for promoting reading in rural Burkina Faso. Village readers are mostly first-generation readers. They have not been immersed, from childhood, in a reading culture. Their parents have not

read them story books as children. Their home environment has been literacy-poor; most homes have no books. Their teachers have not read them story books in the classroom. They have not had free reading time at school. This literacy-poor environment continues to this day, even though about 50% of children in rural Burkina Faso are now attending school. Almost no primary schools have school libraries and secondary schools have just a few shelves of books, often kept locked away in the office of the director. The Ministry of Education proclaims awareness of the importance of promoting a reading culture, even though the budget for book distribution and reading programs is minimal. Indeed, the network of 35 government libraries (known as Celpac) has been virtually abandoned. Likewise, the book publication business in Burkina Faso is quite neglected. Only a handful of children and young adult books are published each year. Novels continue to be published regularly, and there has been a growing interest in publishing memoirs (though often of poor quality). The book distribution system is minimal, with fewer than ten bookstores serving the entire country, and all located in the two large cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso.

The reading ecosystem is changing, of course. Newspapers are increasingly available even in rural areas. Second-hand imported books, however, are increasingly available in the markets of Ouagadougou. Bookstores and informal sector book stalls serve the well-educated urban reading public. The market for reading materials is definitely growing. In the past, this would have been enough to ensure a vibrant reading ecosystem. The introduction of smart phones has clearly changed the purchasing habits and leisure time habits of would-be readers. It is unclear whether places like Burkina Faso will support both a reading culture and a smart phone culture. In any case, rural areas, home to more than 70% of the population, remain neglected.

2. Reading preferences of rural African readers

When books are made available to rural populations in Africa that are first or second-generation school-goers, a class of avid readers emerges (Yannotta and Dent 2005, Goodman 2008, Parry 2009). In Burkina Faso, numerous studies have suggested the cost-effectiveness of promoting reading (Kevane and Sissao 2006, Kevane and Sissao 2008, Diallo 2009, Compaoré, Kevane and Sissao 2012). New readers, especially youth and children, have strong motivation to read.

There is, however, considerable problem of access to books and other reading materials.

Every library, moreover, is faced with choices over how to allocate a limited collections budget. In practice, rural African libraries confront a serious dilemma: fill up shelves with donated European or American books, from organizations such as Books for Africa and BookAid International, or purchase books written by African authors, or books developed with an African reader in mind. Donated books are quite inexpensive. In Ghana, for example, the Ghana Book Trust in Accra provides donated books at nominal cost. African-oriented books, on the other hand, typically cost USD \$5-10 per copy when purchased through bookstores or even direct from publishers. Stranger-Johannessen (2014) discusses this and other ethnical issues confronting rural libraries in Africa

When libraries make choices regarding collection development, studies of reading preferences must be considered. If an African novel or children's book were likely to be read 50 times, while another book developed for the European or American audience were only likely to be read 10 times, then in terms of the "cost per book read," it would be reasonable to pay five times.

Unfortunately, there are few careful studies of the reading preferences in Africa. Griswold (2000) studied adult readers in Nigeria, and found an overwhelming preference for Nigerian and other African novels. Dent, Goodman and Kevane (2014) report on a study of a set of summer reading camps in northern Ghana. Children attending the camps were offered African or European books, on alternating days. The research found that there was no difference in the amount or quality of books read on the different days. In the controlled setting of a summer reading camp, with counsellors encouraging and monitoring reading, Ghanaian schoolchildren seemed to be equally willing to read both types of books. Plonski (2009) also offered some evidence that donated books had similar virtues, in terms of reader preference and outcomes from reading, as African books.

The experience of Friends of African Village Libraries (FAVL) is pertinent. FAVL has found very strong demand for African books compared with donated books, in 13 community libraries in Burkina Faso. FAVL has been aiding village libraries in Burkina Faso since 2001. At present, FAVL established and continues to support 13 village libraries. The libraries are typically one room buildings, often refurbished from abandoned buildings no longer used by the community. Each library collection comprises from 1,000-2,000 books. The libraries and librarians are technically under the office of the mayor as representative of the rural or municipal council. In practice, only a few mayors and councilors evince much interest in the libraries, and much library management and supervision is carried out by FAVL. FAVL donors support transfers to the mayors to cover librarian salaries. FAVL also supports libraries with a variety of reading programs and book renewal.

Libraries supported by FAVL are lending libraries. Records of borrowing indicate overwhelming preference by adult readers for African novels. Roughly 60% of all loans are African novels. Moreover, usage of books in the libraries, especially by schoolchildren, confirms strong preferences for children's books with African settings.

Francophone Africa has, unfortunately, a sizable deficit in the production of children's literature (Attikpoé 2007, Cazenave 2009, De Agustín 2012). Burkina Faso is even worse in this regard, with few publications and limited distribution of books intended for children and youth (Sissao 2009). In view of the difficulties in acquiring children's books, FAVL undertook the process of experimenting with a variety of book production strategies. The next two sections describe two of those strategies: the production of photobooks, and the creation of a center to print and distribute locally authored reading materials.

3. Creating photo books for early readers

FAVL was inspired by the work of Kathy Knowles to begin, in 2007, the production and distribution of photo books for young readers and new adult readers. Kathy Knowles, director of Osu Children's Library Fund, which primarily supports libraries in Ghana, has created more than 50 books. Ms. Knowles approached FAVL to translate several of her books into French and Dioula, one of the largest languages of southwestern Burkina Faso. The results were four books centered on the theme of colors: red, blue, green and yellow. Following that, FAVL translated, and Kathy Knowles published, the book Crocodile Bread.

Seeing these beautiful photo books published and distributed by Knowles was inspiring. Working with Knowles, one also appreciates the enormous craftsmanship that went into each of her books. She is a talented and hard-working photographer. She spends hours on image processing and layout. She works closely with a graphic designer. She

fundraises tirelessly to secure funding for publication of the books. But think about this: For all the huge amount of work that Kathy Knowles puts into her books, they would probably never be distributed to rural Burkina Faso, and no child in rural Burkina Faso would ever read her books and admire the artistry and craftsmanship of the photography and book production.

The perspective at FAVL was that perhaps another way to serve rural readers in village libraries would be to aim for speed and quantity and worry less about quality. Changes in technology had, in 2008, made the creation and printing of photobooks much simpler. So in 2007, FAVL asked a university student, Chelsea Rangel, who was volunteering in a village library in Burkina, to try her hand at making photo books. FAVL received a \$2,000 grant from the Santa Clara Rotary Club for the printing, as well as technical assistance on printing from a Rotary club member, Charlie Wasser. Chelsea, in the course of two months in the village, took photographs for three books. One book was on the making of brewed sorghum beer, one on the making of peanut fritters, and the last on the marketplace in the village. The text was in French and Dioula. FAVL printed 100 copies of each book, at a cost of about \$5 per book, and shipped them to Burkina. They were a big hit in the libraries.

FAVL then conducted another pilot in 2008, with Amy Reggio, another volunteer who spent a summer in Burkina. This time the costs of publication were covered by a grant from the New Field Foundation, based in San Francisco. The goal was to create content that would encourage girls to become better readers. Amy produced three books: My Favorite Books, One Day in the Life of the Midwife, and My Mother and Me. FAVL produced the books using Adobe Indesign, and printed them using a print-on-demand service, called Fastpencil.com.

Once FAVL had “proof of concept,” book production began in earnest. In the fall of 2009, FAVL partnered to launch a study abroad program with Santa Clara University called Reading West Africa. University students spent three months in Burkina, including six weeks in a village immersion experience where they volunteered in the village library. During their village stay, they completed a project for a digital photography class (under the able instruction of Professor David Pace). The project was to create photographic content and text for three photo books. I should point out that creation of these, and the pilot photobooks, involves considerable collaboration with the village librarians and other village residents. Many people are engaged in the production of these books.

Over three years, 24 students created more than 60 photobooks. They are available for preview and purchase on the website:

<http://www.fastpencil.com/users/favlafrica>

Four examples should suffice to give an idea of the content created. The first is Working: What is Your Job by Brian Lance, a talented young photographer, on the kinds of work people do in the villages and nearby towns (see Appendix for examples of several books). It includes a portrait of the mayor of Houndé, with his official sash that has been of interest to villagers, many of whom had never seen the mayor in person or seen pictures of him. The second is Riddles! by Lacey Goodloe. Young children from the village of Dohoun pose and answer common riddles of the village. A third book is The Little Trickster, by Ezequiel Olvera. He got some children to act out the roles of a family that is mystified when small things appear and disappear, and little cakes are eaten by a mysterious ghost. But everything turns out fine; it is just the little one playing a trick on his family. Lest you think all the books are for young girl readers, Lacey Goodloe also made a book oriented towards

boys, The Trucks of Burkina Faso. This book introduces a lot of specialized vocabulary in French, dealing with truck parts. I should point out that building vocabulary is probably one of the main pedagogic purposes of these books. Numerous studies show that early readers acquire vocabulary by reading and inferring from context, especially with visual cues of photographs, what the word might mean. The word then becomes imprinted in the brain, along with the visual.

Lately, FAVL has moved to encourage local photographers and authors to produce photo books. To date, FAVL have printed three books by one of the coordinators, Sanou Dounko. The first is about building of improved latrines, and follows a training done by Dounko. The second is Julie Visits the Village Garden, about a girl visiting a village garden. The third is on the animal market in the town of Djibo, in northern Burkina Faso. Also, students at a local secondary school in Ouagadougou put together a book called Faso Park: A Tourist Book for Children about an amusement park in the capital city. For village readers, this would probably be the only time they would see images of this park. It was a nice chance for privileged youth in Ouagadougou to do a project that directly benefitted rural readers,

An important initiative has been to demonstrate another kind of book that will be very attractive to readers in villages. These are books about recent local history, illustrated, to the extent possible, with photographs from the region. Our test book was the life story of Koura Bemavé, an 80- year old resident of Béréba village. Bemavé served in the French colonial army, and had a small cache of photographs from his youth and military service, and then during his long time in the village. The book FAVL made about his life has been much appreciated. Unfortunately, FAVL has only found one other person willing to share a private stock of photos and reproduce them in a book that can be stocked in the local library. The photos were not as good as the first book, but should nevertheless be appreciated by the local community. FAVL staff members are not sure why few people have not volunteered, despite some efforts to promote the books.

The books have been a fantastic success in terms of generating interest among readers (Ernst 2012). Second only to some children's books by Ivoirian writer Fatou Keita, and the Fati children's books by Kathy Knowles, the photo books have become the most widely read books in the village libraries. Librarians are absolutely convinced of the wide

4. Local books: Multimedia center of Houndé

The success with creating photo books led FAVL to work collaboratively with the Rotary Club of Sunnyvale (and Rotarian Charlie Wasser) to apply for a larger grant from Rotary International to produce even more books printed locally. This five year \$35,000 grant was approved in 2013, and funds were transferred in August 2013. The mayor of Houndé, the province capital, provided a small building which was refurbished and provided with electricity. The building became the Houndé Multimedia Center, with several computers and printers and other book production tools.

The center will organize workshops and encourage local authors to get their ideas into book form. The books are printed as pamphlets, and distributed to local libraries and schools. FAVL was lucky to have a third-year Peace Corps volunteer, Molly Morrison, help with the launch and development of procedures.

In the first year 2013-14, ten books have been created and printed in a label called Series Faso Bibliothèque. This series caters to children and youth at a low reading level. Each page features one sentence per page accompanied by one image per page. The books are

printed in black and white with a color card stock cover. The binding is folded and stapled. The ten books printed are as follows.

1. Le rêve d'Olivia (Olivia's Dream)
A young girl falls asleep and dreams about going to school. She dreams that she will learn how to read and write, make friends, become successful and ultimately become a nurse. When she awakes, she asks her mother to register her for school.
2. L'histoire de Nazounou (The Story of Nazounou)
A little boy is given an orange tree sapling which he plants and cares for. As he gets older, he continues to care for the tree and plants more orange trees which eventually become an orange orchard. He sells the oranges and becomes wealthy and successful.
3. Le soleil et la lune (The Sun and the Moon)
This story is a myth about why the solar eclipse happens.
4. Lisons ! (We Read!)
Children love to read and in this story they read everywhere in the village, from the library to the line at the water pump to up in a tree.
5. L'école et la responsabilité des parents (School and the Responsibility of Parents)
This story highlights the struggles of girls who struggle in school because they are not supported by their parents and they often don't have enough time to study. Because they aren't successful in school, often these girls are taken out of school and married off young.
6. Mon âge, ma chance (My Age, My Luck)
A baby is born and explores his surroundings and appreciates his world as he grows into a child.
7. Je découvre le marché
Young readers are introduced to the vocabulary of a village marketplace.
8. Remi est un enfant sage et poli (Remi is a Wise and Polite Child)
A young boy named Remi shows his responsible and caring nature by working in his family's fields and is rewarded for his good behavior.
9. Un enfant travailleur (A Child who Works)
A boy asks to be enrolled in school so that he can learn to read and write. He also works in his family's fields. His father is pleased and rewards the boy for his hard work.
10. Rama l'orpheline (Rama the Orphan)
Rama is an orphan who is withdrawn and sad, but through determination and hard work she becomes a successful professional woman.

The multimedia center has also printed and distributed a beautiful set of larger-size books in a series called Series Contes du Burkina Faso. The books in this series are full-page images and a few lines of text. The first five books printed are of traditional stories collected, edited and then illustrated by Peace Corps volunteers in Burkina Faso. All of the stories are written in French as well as translated into Mooré and Jula.

1. Le tambour d'Ali (Ali's Drum)
Ali is a young boy who loves to play his drum. He plays his drum all over the village and with his father and grandfather, who are also drummers.
2. Le chasseur et le crocodile (The Hunter and the Crocodile)

This story explains why the crocodiles of this area are considered sacred in a village called Sabou.

3. Princesse Yennenga (Princess Yennenga)
The origin story of the Mossi people revolves around a princess named Yennenga who is a brave female warrior.
4. Le voleur de poissons (The Fish Thief)
A rabbit and a hyena go fishing together and the hyena is tricked by the crafty rabbit that ends up stealing all of his fish.
5. Petit Rouge et le chacal (Little Red and the Jackal)
This is the familiar story of Little Red Riding Hood, in a Burkina context.

The overall response to the books has been positive. The books seem to be interesting to readers because the books are written by local authors. From casual observations in the village libraries, children seemed equally likely to pick up the Faso Bibliothèque books as any other children's book. Numerous adult library patrons mentioned that many people in these villages are familiar with Alidou BOUE (the author of Olivia's Dream) and they are excited to see his photograph in the back of the book. The reading level seems appropriate for primary school children beginning at age 9 or 10, if the child attends school. However, younger children are still interested in the pictures and, according to the librarians, offer their own commentary about what they imagine the text says. High school age students have also expressed interest in the books; some read for pleasure but most are interested in writing their own stories and are looking at the books as inspiration. A few of these students have actually proposed stories or have submitted finished stories.

5. Tools for production and challenges

The tools needed for creating photo books are relatively simple. One indispensable tool is a digital camera capable of taking high quality images. The graphic design and creation of the books is comparatively straightforward, and then can be done in Powerpoint, Microsoft Publisher, and Adobe Indesign. Most people familiar with computers can be trained in the software in an afternoon. A relatively powerful computer is needed to manage the digital files. Making books in Burkina is problematic. Most people lack cameras, and transporting digital files from village region to the FAVL office in Ouagadougou, and then transferring them to the U.S., is difficult. Internet connections are very slow. Even FAVL staff members, after training, have great difficulty in composing suitable images, cropping, adjusting color, and managing files.

As mentioned earlier, books are printed through fastpencil.com. It takes an hour to upload a book (the files can be 50 MB) and its front and back cover. Usually, a single test copy is printed, for about \$25. If the quality is acceptable, then multiple copies can be ordered, for about \$8 per book if more than 20 are ordered. Shipping books to rural libraries in Africa is another significant expense. Costs vary depending on shipping method and country of origin.

Production of pamphlets books in Houndé is also relatively simple. The most important tool is a high-resolution scanner. Books are created using Microsoft Publisher or Microsoft Word. The books are printed on ordinary 24lb paper using a laser printer. The librarian in Koumbia covered her copies of the books with sheets of clear plastic and stapled them in place which has increased the books' durability and perhaps this should be something that the center will do for future copies of Faso Bibliothèque. There have been problems with the printer cartridges. While people familiar with printers can often troubleshoot mechanical

issues connected to the printers, local staff has little experience, and often relies on expensive private contractors for repairs.

As important as the actual tools of production is the imagination to conceive of a story or theme for books. For the photo books, the theme must link the 24 images that are typical of a good photo book. For certain books, such as counting, alphabet or color books, little imagination is required, but a good book needs great photographs. Books with a story theme are more challenging, especially for people not accustomed to be thinking of simple stories for young readers. This is considerably harder.

Creating text is surprisingly challenging for people not accustomed to writing for early and young readers. The vocabulary has to be kept simple. Sentences should be declarative. In order to produce quality work, it is important that the books are grammatically correct. However, this is more difficult to achieve than initially assumed. Each book has to be read multiple times by different people to catch all of the mistakes. FAVL is working on a system to edit the text with minimal usage of paper and ink that will streamline this process.

Many would-be authors, illustrators, and editors are asking for some sort of compensation payment for their work. FAVL explains that the books are for educational purposes and that FAVL is not producing books for profit so there is no compensation to offer except a copy of the finished product.

An important challenge is to produce local language books. Mother tongue literacy is a key pedagogic strategy for primary schools in rural areas (Edwards and Ngwaru 2012, Welch 2012, Opoku-Amankwa, Edu-Buandoh and Brew-Hammond 2014). The Ministry of Education of Burkina Faso has refrained from mother tongue teaching in early years, partly because there is almost no material written in local languages (Lonkila, Edmond, Laurentine, Alamissa et al., Napon 2003). (At the time of this writing, there appear to be no children's books published in any of the national languages of Burkina Faso, though there are pamphlet books for adult education in national languages.) Would-be authors in Burkina Faso, however, appear to be very reluctant to write short books in national languages. They usually explain that they are not trained in the orthography and grammar of national languages, and so they would not be able to write "correctly."

6. Conclusions

There is growing concern in Africa over reading habits and reading culture (Tella and Akande 2007, Commeyras and Mazile 2011). This paper discusses the issue from the point of view of small rural community libraries, striving to promote reading. The experience of Friends of African Village Libraries (FAVL) has been that young readers respond very positively to locally-produced books that feature local people and themes. Realizing this, FAVL has experimented successfully with two initiatives. The first is the production of photo books, printed through fastpencil.com. The second is the establishment of a small media center in the town of Houndé, where a production team uses scanner and laser printers to produce pamphlet-style books. Both kinds of books are widely read in the community libraries of the region.

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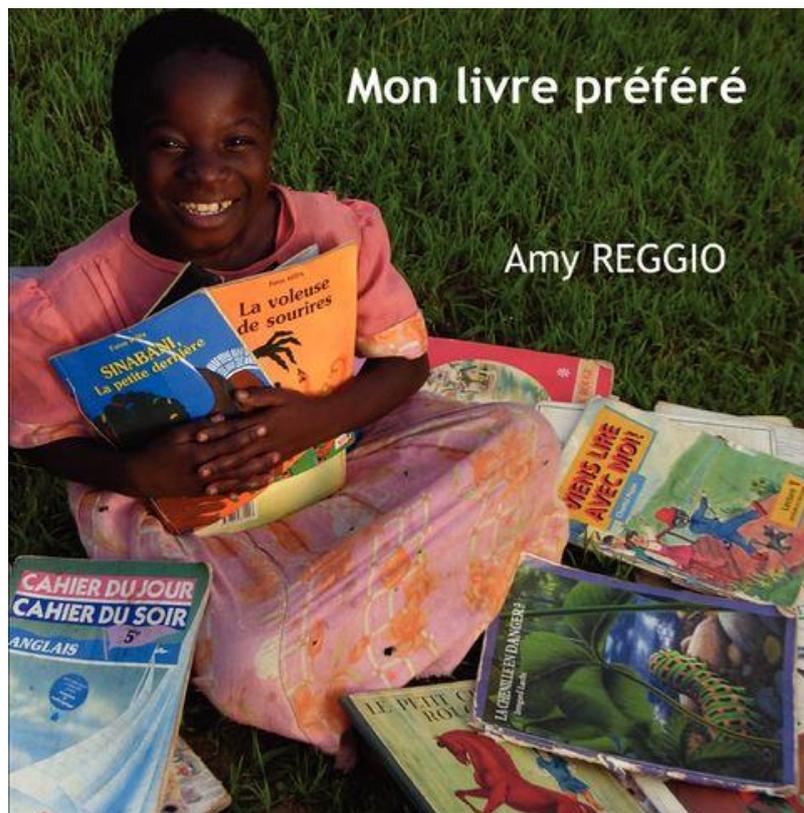
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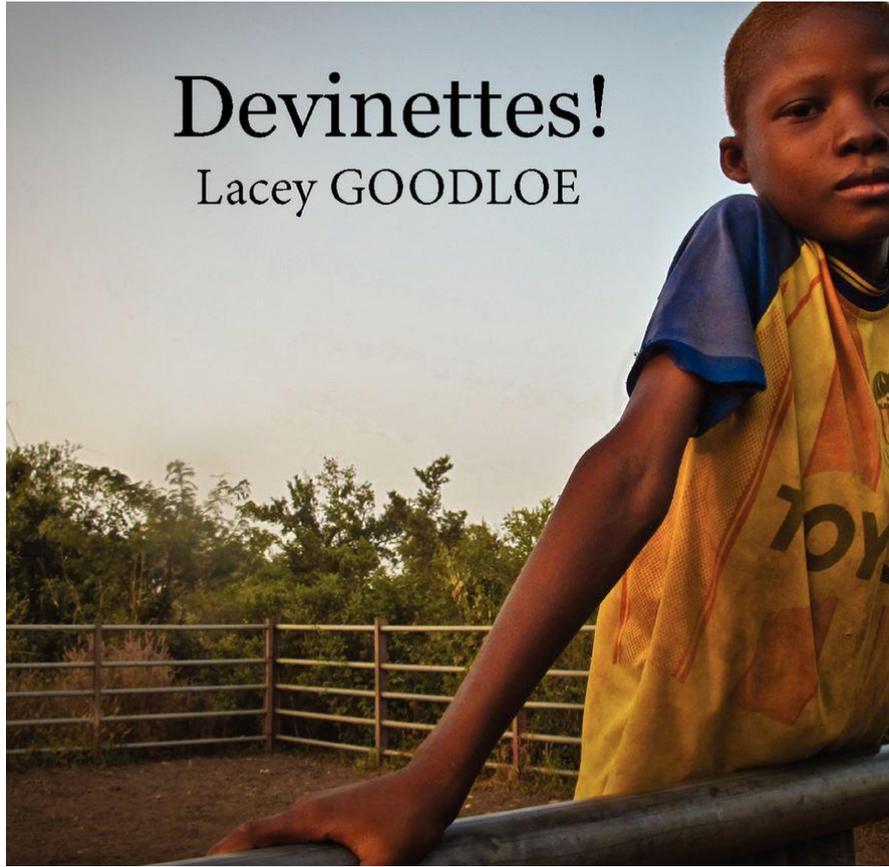
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Appendix: Example books discussed in the paper.



Devinettes!

Lacey GOODLOE

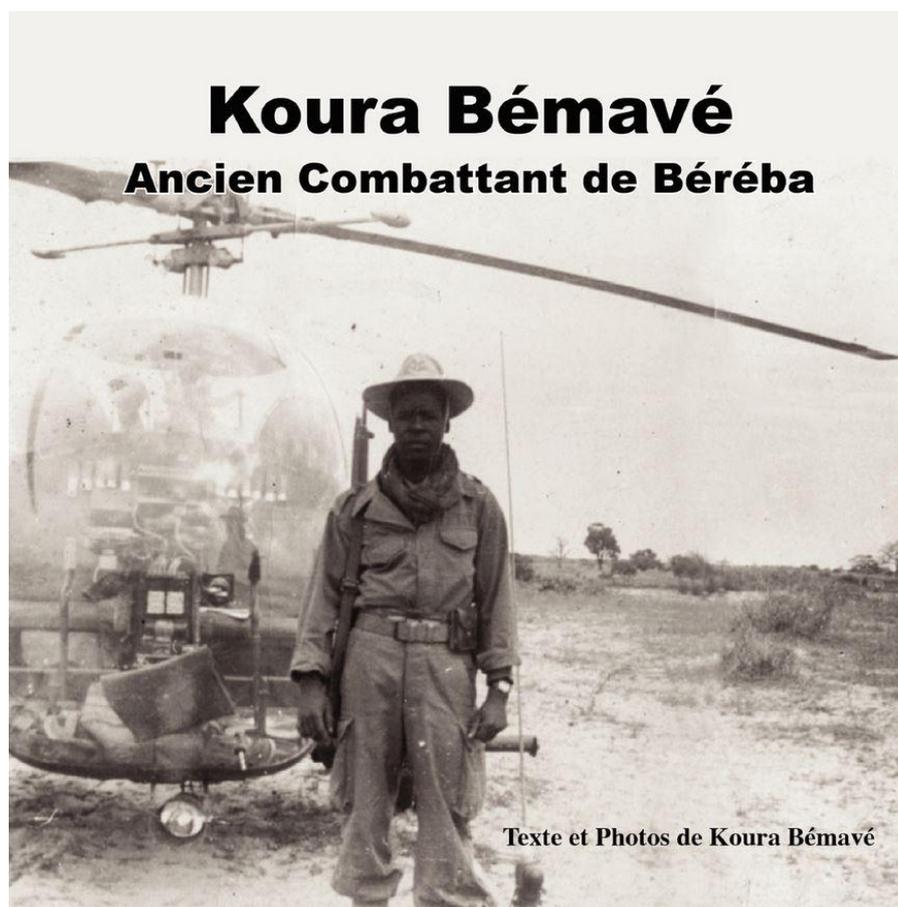


Quelles sont les deux choses côte
à côte mais qui ne se voient pas?

Construction d'une Latrine VIP



Krystle Austin
Sanou Dounko



Koura Bémavé Ancien Combattant de Béréba

Texte et Photos de Koura Bémavé

1
Série : *Faso Bibliothèque*

Le Rêve d'Olivia



Auteur : BOUE Alidou
Illustrateur : MAMBOUE Dofini

2
Série : *Faso Bibliothèque*

L'Histoire de



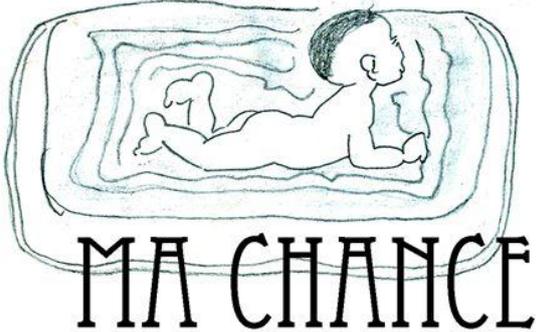
Nazounou



Auteur et Illustrateur:
BONDE Soussounovo

6
Série : *Faso Bibliothèque*

Mon âge,



Ecrit par BOUE Hervé
Dessin de KAHOUN Jean-Noël

9
Série : *Faso Bibliothèque*

**Un enfant
travailleur**

Auteur et Illustrateur: DAFEOGO Wind-Songdin