

**Vita Books Launches *Kenya Resists* Series at the International Conference of the Kenya Library & Information Association**

**25-27 July 2018. Nairobi Safari Club Hotel**

**Vita Books Presentation by Noosim Naimasiah.**

Books, Libraries, Librarians and information can play a crucial social role in creating an equal and just society. Note the word *can*, as they do not automatically do so by merely existing. They are part of the economic, social, political, and cultural fabric of a country and they reflect the prevailing political and social reality of that society. By merely carrying on the main themes and values of the *status quo* is counterproductive when the *status quo* represents the interests of the ruling class. The role of libraries and information is to expand horizons and create greater awareness among people of the reality of the economic and political issues facing the society. They need to make alternative local and international visions, ideas and experiences available to all. But for this to happen, the profession needs to understand that the “professional is political”. So, library and information professionals need to examine their role in this wider political, social and historical context and examine their role in a society divided by sharp contradictions along class lines.

This search for a relevant professional approach in the field of information involves not only librarians, but also publishers, mass media, and those involved in the new digital media as well as policy makers in local and national government. This search is also the theme of this Conference. While new forms of generating, collecting, preserving and delivering information and knowledge are welcome, the form in which this is done should not obscure the key aspects of information – its *content*, and *who* controls content that goes into mass media which is the main source of information for most people. Given the current power imbalance nationally and internationally, it is no surprise that the “mainstream” information flow reflects the interests of ruling classes and corporations who seek to maximize their profits at the expense of public good. The question that then arises for library and information professionals is on whose interest they carry out their “professional” work. The traditional approach is to follow dictates of the ruling class as they control power and government institutions, including policy-making and finance. An alternative approach is that advocated by the world-wide progressive librarianship movement.<sup>2</sup> There need be

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<sup>1</sup>Durrani, Shiraz and Smallwood, Elizabeth (2005): The Professional is Political: Redefining the social role of public libraries.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on the progressive librarianship, see Kagan, Al (2015) Progressive Library Organizations: A Worldwide History. Jefferson, North Carolina, USA: McFarland. For an update of the

no conflict between the two approaches and it is for conferences such as this one to find way to get the best out of both systems and actively this new approach for policy implementation by professional bodies and governments.

Vita Books joins hands with you in this search for a new role for information in society so as to meet the needs of the majority of people, not the wants of a minority elite. In this context we would like to bring to your notice two initiatives from Vita Books that seeks to find this new role in theory and in practice. These are the Progressive Library and Information Activists (PALIAct)'s Ukombozi Library. More on this later.

### ***Kenya Resists***

The second is Vita Books and its publishing programme. This programme is given additional boost today as we launch three titles in the new series, *Kenya Resists*. It is significant that Vita Books decided to launch the series at this conference of librarians and information professionals as we believe that the profession has a crucial role to play in storing relevant information in different forms and disseminate it to people. What is significant about the work of Vita Books is not merely the act of publishing books - many publishers, local and foreign with more resources, do so already. What is different about Vita Books is that it sees its role in publishing and in the field of information in its political and social contest. Its mission is to “publish progressive books on issues related to anti-imperialist struggles and to the establishment of just and democratic societies”, not to maximise profits.

Too few publishers bring out material that reflects the needs and interests of the working people in Kenya. Too few libraries stock even the few such items available. Vita Books seeks to break this mould of a static perspective on books and information that reflects capitalist values only, one that represents mainly the class interests of the ruling classes. Vita Books unashamedly champions the cause of working classes in Kenya and publishes material that is anti-imperialist and socialist in nature. That is something unique in the neo-colonial situation in which Kenya finds itself. Important aspects of this approach are the content of the books and the audience to who these books are aimed. Resistance as a theme for books and information has been banished in Kenya over a long

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information in the book, see: Kagan, Al (2018). Journal of Radical Librarianship Vol. 4, pp. 20-52. Note that the book does not cover progressive movements in Africa, such as Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group (PALIAct) which has set up the Ukombozi Library in Nairobi.

period, first by British colonialism and later by forces that represent the interests of imperialism in independent Kenya. International publishers operating in Kenya do not want to take up the challenge on contents or audience, given their key interest is financial as well influencing minds of Kenyans towards capitalism. They focus on the lucrative educational text market. Many local publishers would like to take up these two aspects seriously but cannot do so for reasons of finances or government policy or political pressure. In this situation, there is also a lack of action in developing readership among working people.

Vita Books, with very limited resources has ventured into this dangerous territory. It is up to progressive people in libraries, educational institutions and in the information field generally to join hands with us in this essential process of creating conditions for liberating people's minds from capitalist prisons and, at the same time, liberating our history from imperialist interpretations. The structures for closer cooperation are being created under the Ukombozi Library.

And so, today, Vita Books launches the first three titles in the *Kenya Resists* series:

- 1. No. 1: Mau Mau, the Revolutionary, Anti-Imperialist Force from Kenya 1948-63. Includes Selection from Shiraz Durrani's *Kenya's War of Independence* and Willy Mutunga's Review of *Dedan Kimathi on Trial*, Edited by Julie MacArthur**

This book provides essential facts about Mau Mau. It seeks to give voice to the Mau Mau resistance fighters who were assassinated or side-lined by the ruling class with the active participation of imperialists who benefited from the rule by this minority elite. It is aimed at young people who were born after independence and who have been deprived of their historical heritage; it is also a tribute to those who played a part in the war of independence and in Mau Mau without whose contribution independence would have remained a dream. So, we echo Bertold Brecht's call, *Reach for the book, it is a weapon* – a weapon to preserve and sustain life, no less.

- 2. No. 2: Trade Unions in Kenya's War of Independence. Includes selected text from Shiraz Durrani's book *Kenya's War of Independence* and Reflections on Makhan Singh from an earlier book published by Vita Books.**

The book shows how the trade union movement played a critical role in liberation of the country. It has outlined the genesis of trade union and connected it to introduction of

capitalist relations that facilitated the building of the railways and importation of Indian labour. The trade union faced the wrath of colonial government due to its approach towards freeing the exploited people. It brought about the issue of classes and class struggle in Kenya. The trade union also united workers therefore giving wide berth to divisive “tribalist” policies instigated by British colonialists.

The book also state that one of the reasons that the trade union movement succeed was because it had a committed leadership guided, not by personal greed, but a clear ideological vision in the interest of working class. It understood that the *economic* interests of working class could only be safeguarded if they, at the same time, safeguarded their *political* interests. The radical trade union movement thus became active in politics and influenced the ideological direction of the progressive forces as well as in Mau Mau.

### **3. No. 3: People’s Resistance to Colonialism & Imperialism in Kenya. Includes A Portrait of Resistance: Karimi Nduthu.**

This book looks at the third pillar of resistance to British colonialism in Kenya – it brings together several aspects of people’s resistance to colonialism, including resistance by nationalities, women, students, peasants and workers in what can only be described as people’s resistance. Given the importance of studying resistance in Kenya, some additional material on Karimi Nduthu whom this book is dedicated is included in in Part 3 of the book.

But that is only a beginning. Vita Books publishes a book on yet another personality who has faced assassination and information blockade over decades: We launch our next book on Pio Gama Pinto in October this year. The struggle continues...

Vita Books stand at the conference stocks copies of these and other progressive book, many of which are available at a special reduced price during the Conference. At the same time, you will be able to place orders for your libraries by leaving details at the stand.

But Vita Books does not just publish books. It is an activist organisation that seeks to link up with communities in their own space to cooperate with working people in collecting, dissemination and storing people’s stories, culture, social reality and history. It is in this context that the Ukombozi

Library, set up by Vita Books, Mwakenya December Twelve Movement (MKDTM) and Mau Mau Research Centre (MMRC) and its community approach needs to be seen.

### **PALIAct Ukombozi Library**

The PALIAct Ukombozi Library was set up by the Progressive African Library and Information Activists' Group (PALIAct) in partnership with Vita Books and the Mau Mau Research Centre in Nairobi in 2017. The idea behind the establishing PALIAct Ukombozi library is to break the traditional model of public libraries set up by colonialism and then continued after independence as the neo-colonial model without any qualitative change on what it does and how. The neo-colonial model sadly reflects elitist traditions, mainly serving interests of the ruling class and ignoring the needs of the majority of people in the country - workers, peasants, fisherpeople, pastoralists. It seeks to inculcate capitalist values among people, based on promoting individual interests and ignoring social values, equality and justice as desirable attributes in a society. These models also depoliticize masses by ignoring or distorting history of resistance and working people. It rejects people's cultural, social, political and economic as valid arena for public institutions. It projects a false sense of neutrality in the ongoing class struggles which in effect means taking sides on behalf of the establishment, the ruling classes and *status quo*, totally ignoring workers, peasants, unemployed and masses of people in general. Another aspect of the neo-colonial model of library is that it does not provide information in the language of people, does not show the reasons for people's poverty and hides facts about exploitation and oppression in our society. Following from this, it does not show how people in other parts of the world have struggled against such models and achieved major successes.

The above challenges therefore deprive people, especially the young, of the material that would give them a real understanding of social forces and inspire them in their quest for social justice as relevant materials are hard to come by. The Ukombozi Library was set up to fill the gap by providing a people-orientated information service and making progressive material easily available. It also seeks to encourage reading, studying and research activities among people. In addition, the Ukombozi Library incorporates the Community ReachOut initiative which breaks the colonial library mould and takes the library to various communities to enhance personal and national development by providing information where people are. Community groups, libraries and institutions are welcome to be institutional members of the PALIAct Ukombozi Library.

The PALIAct Liberation Library has an initial collection of almost a thousand titles of progressive material, mostly books but also pamphlets, videos and photographs. It incorporates December Twelve Movement's<sup>3</sup> underground library set up by Nazmi Durrani in the 1980s. A majority of these are classics which are either out of print or cannot be found in the local libraries or bookshops. Other material has been donated by Mau Mau Research Centre, Vita Books and many progressive individuals active in the information struggle in Kenya.

Membership is open to all who agree with the vision and principles of PALIAct, irrespective of class, ethnicity, religion, gender, region, race or disability. Individuals or institutional membership is also available on payment of appropriate fees. The Library is managed by a Management Committee which gives direction and provides necessary support for achieving the objectives of the Library and of PALIAct.

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<sup>3</sup> now Mwakenya- December Twelve Movement (MKDTM).

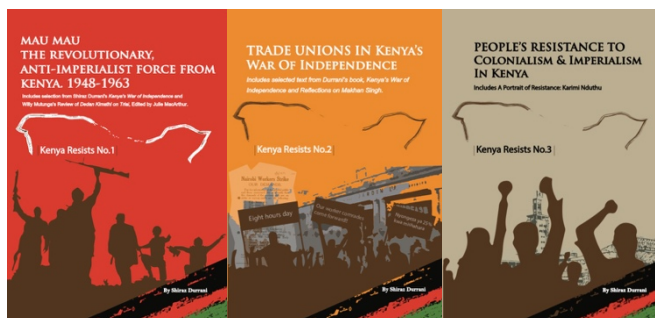
## Vita Books Launches Kenya *Resists* Series

Vita Books is pleased to inform you that it launched the first three numbers in the new series, *Kenya Resists* on July 26, 2018 at the International Conference of the Kenya Library and Information Association held at the Nairobi Safari Club Hotel.

The series covers different aspects of resistance by people of Kenya to colonialism and imperialism. They are reproduced from published books, unpublished reports, research and oral or visual testimonies. Future numbers will include original material on resistance. Each number focuses on a specific aspect of resistance before and after independence.

The first 3 titles just published are:

- No. 1: Mau Mau, the Revolutionary, Anti-Imperialist Force from Kenya 1948-63. Includes Selection from Shiraz Durrani's Kenya's War of Independence and Willy Mutunga's Review of Dedan Kimathi on Trial, Edited by Julie MacArthur
- No. 2: Trade Unions in Kenya's War of Independence. Includes selected text from Shiraz Durrani's book Kenya's War of Independence and Reflections on Makhan Singh from an earlier book published by Vita Books.
- No. 3: People's Resistance to Colonialism & Imperialism in Kenya. Includes A Portrait of Resistance: Karimi Nduthu.



Vita Books publications are available at Prestige Bookshop along Mama Ngina Street and Bookstop Yaya Centre in Nairobi. African Books Collective (<http://www.africanbookscollective.com>) distribute Vita Books worldwide. Order at: [orders@africanbookscollective.com](mailto:orders@africanbookscollective.com)



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**Launch photos: Vita Books presentation by Noosim Naimasih**



Audience at the Vita Books presentation.



Noosim Naimasih launches the Series



Kimani Waweru (Centtre) at the Vita Books stand