

## Dalarna University

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# **Letters, Authority, and Secrecy**

## **The case of Karagwe in Tanzania**

### **Introduction**

Since the beginning of the 1980s, research on literacy as a social practice embedded in culture and depending upon social institutions and conditions has documented how people understand, use, and make meaning of literacy. Based on the groundbreaking studies by Scribner and Cole (1981), Street (1984), and Heath (1983), close descriptions of literacy in specific contexts have been presented. Many of these studies have thrown light on the nature of written texts outside the mainstream and have created insights into how people take hold of and make sense of literacy, in their conceptions about literacy and their use of it. Close examinations of people's daily literacy practices have revealed that, although literacy, as a tool, may have been imposed by external forces, users have taken hold of literacy and generated literacy practices in response to perceived social and cultural needs. These local literacy practices seem more often than not to follow patterns that contradict those imposed by authorities. These studies have helped us discover how "local communicative conventions determine how the processes and techniques associated with literacy and schooling are actually employed" (Street 1993: 27).

In the present paper I draw on a study carried out between 1999 and 2003 (Author 2004), and a follow-up study carried out in 2010, to create understanding of one particular type of literacy among the Banyambo in the northwest of Tanzania: the use of letters. Despite a high degree of institutionalization of letter writing in Karagwe, the genre itself has been reconstructed

and adapted to culture-specific communicative needs in the society, including secrets, that are strongly related to traditional values of authority. The paper aims to show how letters, as a genre of literacy, are used in that setting in relation to authority and secrecy.

### **Theoretical framework**

Literacy is here studied as an ethnographic object that needs to be analyzed in relation to its contexts without a priori claims. This includes an analysis that is sensitive to social, cultural, historical, and political aspects. Literacy is an aspect of language and in the era of globalization literacy has a critical role as it allows text to be moved both physically and symbolically, not least through digital media. Blommaert (2010) sees language as something “intrinsically and perpetually mobile, through space as well as time and *made for* mobility. The finality of language is mobility, not immobility” (s xiv, italics in original) and that also counts for literacy. In his sociolinguistic theory of globalization Blommaert highlights the fact that many people nowadays find their linguistic resources to be of very low value, which becomes a problem of voice and mobility, not just a problem of difference but of inequality. This is particularly the case with written forms of language as standards and norms tend to be more strict when concerned with written than with oral forms, and because different language varieties that may be perceived to be of lower status or value become more visible in writing. This becomes particularly relevant in many post-colonial contexts, where prestige forms of literacy are often in the colonial language, which is mastered by only a small élite, while literacies in local languages are devalued. One example of this is in Tanzania, where only literacies in Swahili or English count in official contexts, with English the more highly valued, although only a small minority master it, while writing in local languages or nonstandard writing in Swahili or English are devalued and often ridiculed.

Following research in the field of New Literacy Studies (Street 1993, 1995, 2001, Barton 2001) researchers have used anthropological and cross-cultural frameworks to study situated literacies in a variety of places such as the USA (Heath, 1983), Peru (Hornberger, 1994), Iran (Street, 1995), Polynesia (Besnier, 1995), South Africa (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996), the UK (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, 2001), Eritrea (Wright, 2001), Pakistan (Zubair, 2001), and Tanzania (Author, 2004, 2006a). Outcomes from these studies have been used in the planning of literacy projects and literacy education in different developmental settings such as South Africa (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996), Namibia (Papen, 2005), and Rwanda (Author 2006b). Researchers such as Besnier (1995) in Polynesia, Bloch (1993) in Madagascar, Kulick and Stroud (1993) in Papua New Guinea, and Street (1993) in Iran have shown in similar studies that, although literacy was introduced in a top-down manner by westerners, people did not passively receive literacy, but they made sense of it, related it to their daily lives, and strove to make use of it in ways they perceived as relevant. While literacy apparently has shaped people's lives, people themselves have simultaneously shaped literacy to make it a tool in their own day-to-day life settings.

The concept of *literacy practices* (Scribner & Cole, 1981, Street 1993, Barton & Hamilton 1998), which is connected to anthropological perspectives of literacy as culturally and historically situated social practices, has shed new light on literacy projects and enabled a more critical and reflective perspective on literacy. This perspective challenges old views and opens ways for researchers to study literacy holistically as a multiple phenomenon embedded in its social and cultural contexts.

While Akinnaso (1996) and Barton (2001) call these non-élite and peripheral literacies that are commonly self-generated *vernacular*, Blommaert (2008) refers to Fabian (1990) when he uses the term *grassroots literacy*, which characterizes as fragmenter, heterographic and with

frequent use of vernacular varieties and non-standard features. He also argues that they are usually given low valued and are placed in the periphery. Earlier, I have used the word *dominated* (Author, 2004, 2006a) to denote this type of literacy, which I described as used outside official contexts, learned in informal settings, and holding low status. The concept *dominated* denotes that this type of literacy is perceived as less powerful. It may not necessarily be empowering although it has the potential to be.

### **The setting**

This paper draws on research carried out in Karagwe district, which is located in the northwest corner of Tanzania, bordering on Uganda and Rwanda. The inhabitants, about 500,000 Banyambo, speak the local language Runyambo. Through schooling and official discourses the majority are also fluent in Swahili, the national and official language of Tanzania. The area is multilingual and many people cross the borders - some as refugees, others for commercial, family-related, and other reasons. Those who were lucky enough to achieve higher education also know some English, the high-status language connected to higher education and elite groups (for a discussion of the linguistic situation in Karagwe see Author 2004, 2005). The economy of Karagwe is slightly above the average in Tanzania and the area is well represented on a national level in the central government and in higher administration. At the same time Karagwe is far from the center in Dar-es-Salaam and the coast, and throughout history the exchange of people and goods between Karagwe and the neighboring areas in Uganda and Rwanda has been extensive.

Karagwe is vast and most of the Banyambo live scattered over the area, relying on hoe-farming for their existence, with plantain as the main staple crop and coffee as the main cash

crop. However, the centers are traditionally centers for business and the transport of goods. The Arab slave traders passed through the area from the second half of the nineteenth century until the coming of the colonizers, the Germans. Also, today many goods pass through on their way to other parts of the country and neighboring countries. Literacy was introduced in the area by the German colonizers in the late nineteenth century. They created a western type of school system, which was taken over by the British, who seized power in the area in 1916. Literacy in Arabic never spread outside the Muslim minority who manage the trade.

During 1999-2003, I carried out an ethnographic study on literacy practices in the area, within and outside of school (Author, 2004). I found that people, nearly 40 years after independence, used literacies of varied types, for many functions, and in a variety of languages in their lives. Karagwe is an area with strong hierarchical traditions and I found that different types of literacies related differently to power. Thus I divided the types of literacies I found into three categories, which I named *dominant literacies*, *semi-dominant literacies*, and *dominated literacies*. *Dominant literacies* were introduced by authorities, for example through schooling and dominant discourses, and these literacies were in English and Swahili and were frequently used to demonstrate authority, for example in school settings, in official settings, and in some religious settings. The *semi-dominant literacies* occurred in Swahili, English, and the local language, Runyambo. They were also introduced by authorities, but on lower levels, for example through adult education and seminars among groups of women, farmers, and mothers to small children. These literacies were also used by low-educated people in connection with small-scale projects, health, and economic planning. What I called *dominated literacies* occurred in a variety of languages; apart from Swahili, English, and Runyambo they also occurred in languages such

as Arabic, Kinyarwanda, and Luganda. These literacies were often related to emotions and are mainly used for private matters, for decorations, and as mnemonic devices.

One genre of literacy that was not analyzed in this earlier research was the use of letters and different types of written messages. The Banyambo frequently write, send, receive, and read letters, both private and official. Letters are important through all three of the categories - dominant, semi-dominant, and dominated. In the period after the first study, I started to analyze the letters that had been collected during and after the first study. The pattern of power relations is also visible in this genre. Letters are used to maintain, reproduce, and resist existing hierarchical systems. Authorities frequently utilize letters, or the non-existence of a certain letter, to manifest their authority, while individuals may produce letters according to official norms to try to get access to “goods” such as wealth or status. Individuals or groups of people try to improve their life conditions through letters, for example in the form of various types of applications. People also write, send, receive, and read private letters and messages in the process of obeying or resisting existing or perceived authorities. These private messages are mainly delivered personally through messengers; frequently children make these deliveries.

In the earlier study I found that secrecy and authority were important among the Banyambo (Author, 2004), and this is obvious today also. People keep secrets and there are intricate systems of keeping and sharing secrets. The secrecy is connected to the strong sense of rank that is visible all through the society, in families, in villages, and in official systems, both traditionally and in contemporary Karagwe. Letters and private messages play important roles both for the secrecy and the authority.

During the earlier study many of the subjects took initiative and wrote letters to me; most of these were private and personal. They either delivered their letters personally, or sent them by messenger or by ordinary mail. This continued after the study was finished in 2003 and has resulted in more than four hundred letters, most of which I have responded to. In some cases letters have been exchanged with the same individuals through more than ten years. Since 2000, access to communication through mobile phones and e-mail has increased rapidly in the area and thus some letters from this time are in digital form. The earlier study also included the use of different types of official letters.

### **Methods and approaches**

The perspective of literacy with a focus on the users of literacy and of literacy as a socio-cultural phenomenon, and the approach to authority and secrecy as situated phenomena, makes ethnography an appropriate framework as it has the potential to give a holistic/contextual, comparative, and cross-cultural picture of the phenomenon in focus. Ethnography concerns issues of human choice and meaning, and in that sense it concerns issues of improvement in educational practice and is thus highly relevant for educational research (Erickson, 1986).

Through this interpretative approach information may be found that is needed in educational planning. Through systematic documentation, what is happening can be made visible and it may be possible to understand how people make sense of literacy.

In both studies I have taken advantage of the fact that I have been involved in a development project in the area since 1988. Thus I have developed friendships with some individuals and families over more than 20 years and am familiar with the area and people there.

The informants come from different geographic parts of the district, are varied in terms of social and economic status, belong to various religious congregations, and are included in different types of networks. The first study was carried out through five field studies during the years 2000–2003 with a total of nine months in the field. Techniques such as participant observation and interviews were used, and artifacts such as written messages, print, and pictures that represented different ways with script were collected.

The fieldwork for the follow-up study was carried out over three weeks in 2010. Using an ethnographic perspective, data were gathered through participant observation and interviews and in the form of artifacts. The main sources of information were subjects and primary schools that were already well known through the earlier study. Artifacts consisted mainly of collected letters and messages, on paper and in digital form. Informal interviews were carried out. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, both secrecy and authority are matters that are not usually openly discussed; most interviews were not recorded as earlier experience had revealed that the presence of a tape recorder or a digital recorder affected the interviews negatively. Because of the strong hierarchical context anything that brings to mind authority results in “standard answers”; that is, people tend in such cases to answer according to expected norms, while interviews in informal settings bring out more authentic information. Ethical considerations as stated by the Swedish Research Council were strictly adhered to. As authority and secrecy are delicate topics, all data are kept in ways that conceal the identities of participants. Similarly, all examples in this paper are presented in ways that do not allow recognition of individuals.

As experiences gathered extend from 1988 to the present, 2011, I will use present tense when referring to results that are relevant through this time, and I will use past tense when referring to results from the main study conducted from 1999 to 2005.

Secrecy and authority are socially and culturally situated phenomena and as phenomena they are fluid and abstract. Secrets are also, by definition, difficult to get hold of. Although the two are related to each other, I will start here with authority, as it is less abstract and ephemeral than secrecy, and also because I understand the secrecy among the Banyambo as something created in response to prevailing views about authority in the area.

### **Authority among the Banyambo**

Authority is an aspect of power that is socially and culturally situated. Power is here understood as negotiated in interaction between people. Individuals or groups claim, manifest, and resist power. In Karagwe, authority is visible through the hierarchical system, which has strong traditions. Karagwe belongs to the Inter-lacustrine area, the area west of Lake Victoria that was divided during the Berlin-conference in 1884 in what became parts of Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. In this area traditionally kings from the ruling pastoralist clans, in Karagwe mainly the Hinda but also the Hima and Chwezi clans, had great power over the agriculturalist clans, the Bairu. The king of Karagwe was the strongest of the kings from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries (Katoke, 1973). The area had a centralized ruling system from the fifteenth century (Ishumi, 1980). Many myths about the power of the kings are told among the Banyambo, such as that they are said to have had divine power, for example, with drums that could “speak” without anybody touching them, that they were friends of the lions, and that one king created a lake to stop a rival army by hitting his stick to the ground. Another myth is that the son who was to be the successor of the king was sent away to be brought up in

Uganda,<sup>i</sup> because, as people say, the king is the single highest person, so how can the newborn king and the present king be in one place? Also, myths about the kings' cruelty abound.

The power of the kings was based in a hierarchical system with a ruling clan and a strong unifying system. Important for this unity was a school system, Omuteko, involving all boys aged 10 to 12 years who were trained in good manners, rites, behavior towards elders and people of higher rank, construction of huts, and military skills. This held the kingdom together as a strong unit. Another important factor for the power of the king was the extraction of iron from the soil, which was important for armed strength. The hierarchical system of today thus has strong traditions. The powers of the king of Karagwe declined during the nineteenth century for several reasons, and finally the German colonizers hanged the last king, Ntare VII, in 1915 (Katoke 1973) to manifest their authority over the area.

In contemporary Karagwe the hierarchical system is visible in all parts of the society. Children are socialized into the system as soon as they are weaned. It is perceived as important not to spoil children, “ateinewatesa,” and children are encouraged to be self-reliant and “okuhurira” (to show obedience) in relation to parents and other adults. The socialization also includes showing “amakune” (respect for rank) and “omutima” (heart, politeness, and proper behavior, deference towards elders). The first expression in Runyambo that I learned in the homes I visited, after greetings, was “nakutera,” I will hit you. This is frequently said in homes to children by adults or older children. However, most children are not frequently hit, but are commonly handled with care and shown affection, albeit discreetly. Children are encouraged to be quiet and stay in the background when in the vicinity of elders.

The hierarchical system is also visible in the system of greeting. Greetings are important in Karagwe for the manifestation of the hierarchy, and the rules are detailed. The person of lower rank should always go first; that is, should start the greeting. He or she should never look the higher-ranking person in the eyes, should bend down, and kneel with the palms together, stretched towards the higher-ranking person. There are degrees of deference. A small child, for example, should touch the cheeks of an adult with his or her hands. One should always greet an elderly person by kneeling on the ground and stretching both hands towards him or her. People used to greet the king by lying flat down on the ground. The expressions used in greeting vary according to age, sex, and rank. Greetings are perceived as among the most important things for a child to learn, and they are among the first things children are explicitly taught.

Generally, the school system is hierarchical all over Tanzania, but it is more strictly hierarchical in Karagwe than in most other parts of the country. Students must be obedient, and various corporal punishments are used. Many teachers take the chalk in one hand and the stick in the other when they go to teach in the classroom. At school, any child passing any adult on the school ground should stop, put his or her feet together, bend the knees, and greet “Shikamoo”. The answer will then be: “Marahaba!” Obedience is also demanded by all persons perceived to be of lower rank, such as parents in relation to teachers, teachers in relation to headmasters, headmasters in relation to school inspectors, and so on. A teacher who displeases a superior may be transferred to a distant, remote setting with one day’s notice.

Both at home and at school, children may be said to have two voices, or discourses - one passive, used when they are near adults, the other active, used when they are among other children. The differences between the two discourses in terms of behavior are big. While children are withdrawn and quiet in the company of adults, they are active, creative, and

enterprising among themselves. Adults may say about small children that they have “many words,” meaning they have not yet learned to be quiet and listen to adults. When the son of Ma Restituta was three years old he was very talkative. Thus she told me: “Yule ana maneno mengi. Angalia Asimwe, tayari amenyamaza.” (That one has many words. Watch Asimwe (his five-year-old sister), she has already become quiet.) At the age of 10 the son was referred to with the following words: “Unafikiri bado ana maneno mengi? A a, yamekwisha.” (Do you think he still has many words? No, they have come to an end. (Literally: The debate has come to an end)). By that she meant that finally he had grown and learned to be quiet in the presence of adults.

Adults, too, are told, by persons perceived as superiors, not to speak so much and not to tell other people certain things. People may show their authority by telling others, perceived to be of lower rank, not to talk so much. A husband may tell his wife not to talk about family affairs and family finances with others. She will probably still do so, but she will do it secretly. Thus authority is used to silence people perceived to be of lower rank and secrets then become a way to claim voice, although only in restricted ways as secrets are by definition intended to be kept from certain people.

### **Secrets in the society and in families**

The focus of the first study was on literacy and it was only at the end that I started to realize that there had also been many secrets around. People had involved me in many types of secrets and there was a pattern in the secrets, a pattern connected to the hierarchical system and authority, and the secrets often involved literacy. Thus literacy as a societal phenomenon turned out to include secrets as another societal phenomenon.

A myth that is often told among the Banyambo about secrecy is the myth about the smiths of the kings, the *Abakama*. Blacksmithery was common in this area, probably from the sixteenth century, possibly earlier (see Schmidt, 1997). Archeological evidence has shown the existence of blacksmithery in the area as early as in the sixth century. Having access to iron weapons, and perhaps also iron tools such as hoes, together with the strong centrality in the society, was important for the power of the king. However, he is said to have protected the secrets about blacksmithery by picking out the eyes of the smiths. The conclusion in this myth is that although this knowledge was available here at this early age, the secrecy stopped people from using it for their development in the way industrialism was developed in the Western world. Thus the secrecy in this myth is seen as one reason for the poverty in the area.

Secrets are a way for people to include or exclude others from networks and groups. By telling me secrets people invited me into different types of groups. Bartholdson (2007) defines three “genres” of secrets: gossip, confidences, and narrations about injustice. The latter makes relations of power, status, and dependency visible. Secrets of this kind constitute a risk for the informant, the one who reveals the secret, as she or he may be punished or be subjected to sanctions if the secret is exposed. The secrets I was involved in were mainly of this latter kind. From this I interpret that I was perceived as someone who was interested in injustices, and possibly also someone who constituted a potential for solutions and that those who involved me in their secrets trusted that I would not reveal them. In some situations people asked me to take certain measures in order to solve certain states of affairs or perceived evils. Particularly women and children who had been exposed to abuse took initiative to secretly ask me to become involved in their matters. In some cases this placed considerable pressure on me. As a researcher, I had to take care not to intrude in the field at the same time as I had to act as a human being who

cared about people. As a trusted friend I had to act like one although I could not get too involved in people's private matters.

Through the field studies I became involved with some families, or rather they involved me in some of their more private matters by telling me secrets, often concerning financial matters. I soon realized that stepparents and stepchildren seemed generally not to be on good terms with each other. Although there is traditionally an extended family system, with women moving to the clan of the husband, in most "core families" inside the extended families there are many children who do not have both parents in the household where they live. The reasons for that are many. First, children are commonly moved around so that they live some years in another family, such as with an aunt, a sibling, grandparents, or other relatives. Second, due to AIDS and other diseases, many children are orphans and thus may live with other caretakers. According to my experience, children in these situations are commonly well treated, although of course to varying degrees, as some families actually suffer from having too many children to care for. However, many children live with stepparents due to divorce or because one parent has died and the other has remarried. Women usually give birth to many children, and many women die early due to poor health. When this occurs, the husband may remarry, and the new wife becomes the stepmother for the children. Divorce is also quite common as some husbands hit their wives and children frequently. There is a lot of envy and jealousy between stepparents and stepchildren. Over the years I have been told several stories about tragedies concerning step-relations. The envy is usually of financial art. In families where the man has married several wives (polygamy is quite common), there is usually also much envy and jealousy between the wives and the children of different wives. The envy and the jealousy then result in secrecies.

Family finances make up an important area of secrecy among the Banyambo. Lack of money is a problem for many families, and hiding money, preventing access to it, is perceived as important by many. In most cases when somebody is required to pay for something, the answer is: “Sina hela” (I don’t have any money), even when this is apparently not true. Husbands and wives usually keep their finances secret from each other. Both suspect that the other will not give his or her share to the provision of the family if the assets of the spouse are made known. In the household the woman is traditionally supposed to be responsible for supplying the home with food, firewood, and water through her farming and work. The husband is supposed to be responsible for the house-building and for bringing assets such as money to the home. Traditionally, children also contributed to the household through their work, so having many children was an asset. However, due to schooling children have now become a burden as they need economic support through schooling, particularly when they attend secondary school. The cost to send one child to school for one year may equal several months’ of a teacher’s salary, yet few parents have salaries at all. A wife who has managed to sell some of her harvest would be reluctant to reveal this to her husband, suspecting that he would then not support the schooling of the children. The husband similarly would be reluctant to show his assets to his wife, or wives, afraid that he would be required to share. Thus finances are a source of envy, jealousy, and secrecy not only in families but also in social life more generally. Particularly stepchildren and stepmothers suspect each other of trying to get more than their share economically. Children are socialized into the secrecy through parents who may ask them secretly if they have got equal shares, for example from a stepparent, and children are encouraged to pass such information on secretly. Thus family life and financial matters are two important areas of secrecy, and an intricate web of secrets is created.

One case which resulted in discussions about secrets concerning household finances was the tragedy of the shipwreck of *MV Bukoba* in 1996, in which between 700 and 1000 persons are assumed to have drowned in Lake Victoria. Among them were many businessmen and breadwinners from Karagwe. In some families problems are said to have arisen as the deceased had been secretive about his assets, for example, bank accounts. This is then taken as an argument for being more open about financial matters inside families.

### **Secrets among children and in school**

Although adults exercise strong authority over children, children have considerable space of their own, where no adults interfere and where they may exercise their active voices. In their own contexts, outside the sphere of the adults, children play, they are creative, and they have a great deal of freedom. This is also the case in school settings, where pupils behave as they are told, calmly and politely in the presence of a teacher, but are quite free in the school yard and in the absence of teachers. This means that although some classes may have up to 200 pupils, particularly in the lower classes, children are serious and concentrating, and there is very little fuss going on among pupils in classrooms. In school yards, however, they play, sing, shout, and have fun while adults are not around. This division into spaces where children exercise their passive voices and spaces where they exercise their active voices is important for the construction of the pattern of secrets.

Through field studies in the earlier study, it became clear that although obedience is very important in different parts of the society, people did resist by not obeying. They showed obedience, but they did not necessarily obey. This was particularly obvious in schools. One example from the earlier study was when an officer from the District Education Office came to

one of the schools and demanded that teachers arrive on time every morning and all but one of the teachers were very late the next day, much later than usual. Another example was the school rules that hung on the wall in every headmaster's room. One of the rules demanded that only Swahili and English be used in the school compound, meaning that no Runyambo was allowed at all. However, the headmaster's room was the place in school where Runyambo was most frequently used as it was the normal language used for communication between teachers and between the headmaster and parents.

Children and pupils also resist by not obeying, but because the authority is so strong, they do so secretly. For example, children may run away from homes to escape hostile fathers or stepparents. Pupils may "hide in the bushes" (Author, 2004), which means that they do not actually go to school but hide on their way between home and school. This is a way to escape teachers' punishment, which is often corporal, and simultaneously to avoid the punishment they would likely get at home if they were to refuse to go to school. "Hiding in the bushes" may be perceived as resistance through secrecy among children. For ethical reasons I did not explicitly question either adults or children about this habit as this could create risks for children, but many children and adolescents told me about it and I had the opportunity to witness it myself. Thus, in this hierarchical society, secrecy may be perceived as a form of resistance by claiming voice, although secretly, and the hierarchy thus creates different spaces for people of lower rank, such as school yards for pupils, spaces where secrets may be constructed and exchanged. While there is little room to openly oppose authorities, secrets offer opportunities for less dangerous forms of resistance.

### **Literacy, authority, and secrecy**

Literacy was introduced with the coming of the colonizers and the missionaries, together with Christianity in the second half of the nineteenth century. This did not cause any major changes in the hierarchical system, except for the kings being replaced by foreign rulers, but literacy offered new ways to interact and to handle power. Literacy in itself does not have a direct relation to power (Street, 2001, Author, 2007) but may be used to exercise power, to manifest power, to resist power, and to demand power. For example, for groups that traditionally held less power, such as young people and women, literacy and school success became one way to advance in the hierarchical system. Literacy is also a useful tool for passing and keeping secrets, although, ironically, secrets may be more easily revealed when in written form. Therefore I will now show how one way of using literacy, through letters and messages, is related to secrecy and authority in Karagwe.

### **To come with a letter**

Letters are important in all three types of literacy practices I found in Karagwe: dominant literacy practices, semi-dominant literacy practices, and dominated literacy practices. Letters may be related to authority and secrecy. Authorities in Karagwe frequently use letters to manifest their authority. Official information, decrees, or summons may be presented in letter form. Such letters are commonly sent by mail or delivered personally to a village officer, headmaster, or other leader, who then sticks it on a board, on a tree, or on a wall. When presenting oneself to an official person of higher rank, for example in the central administration, it is perceived as relevant to “come with a letter.” This means that somebody has written a letter recommending you to the person in place. Authorities may deny access to certain settings if one fails to come with a letter that is perceived as appropriate. On several occasions during my research people of higher rank demanded that I present certain letters before they agreed to receive me. The absence

of a letter was frequently taken as a reason to deny me access to certain places. One example was when I had planned with a nurse to visit the mother-and-child-care center where she served once a month. The center was in the shade under some trees in a school yard. As in similar cases, I first addressed the doctor in charge and presented him with my research permit and the written letter from the District Office which guaranteed me access to different settings for my research. I was also accompanied by the village chairperson as an extra recommendation. However, this doctor demanded that I add another type of letter from another part of the District Office and thus denied me access to the center in question. According to the chairperson who accompanied me and the nurse, this was only because the doctor wanted to show his authority and he was well known for claiming his authority in this way.

However, letters of this dominant type are not only used to exercise one's authority over people perceived to be of lower rank. They are also used to request status, favors, or power. A group of women, farmers, or parents could, for example, address an authority, an organization, or an administrative office requesting subsidies, a job, seminars, or similar things. As the norms of these types of letters are formally taught in school, many inhabitants can use them, either on their own or with someone's help. People can sue a neighbor who trespasses on their land, for example. A wife may sue her husband for divorce if he does not fulfill his responsibilities. By no means does everyone do this, and few succeed, but it is quite common for people to be involved in such cases.

An example with a fraudster who failed to produce the right type of letter and was caught took place during the field study in 2010. A woman wanted to find a school for her son. A man promised her a place for him if she gave him 25 000 shillings in advance. She was to present another 10 000 shillings at a certain time at a certain place in the town. At the first encounter she

gave the man the required 25 000 and received a letter promising that she would be flown to the school together with her son the next day. When she read the letter it seemed correct but she became suspicious as it was handwritten. It should have been typed, had it been an official letter. Thus, before she went to give the man the remaining 10 000, she talked to a male friend who agreed that according to norms such a letter should have been typed. He observed from a distance when she went up to the man and he then decided to call the village officer whose office was nearby. The two of them then caught the man and took him to the police where he was found to be a “tapeli,” a fraudster. This is an example of how somebody tries to claim authority through a letter but fails to produce it according to norms.

Significantly, a letter is put into an envelope that is closed, with the name of the addressee written on it. This is true also of letters of the semi-dominant type. These letters also follow formal rules but are of a more personal type. Letters of this type will not be valued based on their level of correctness, as letters of the dominant type are. On this level letters such as these used to be sent to call for meetings. They were more often sent through friends and acquaintances than through the ordinary postal system, as the postal services were not entirely effective. The delivery of such letters could entail walking long distances; often children were sent to deliver the letters<sup>ii</sup> and many never reached their addressees. In group seminars and in group meetings with a visitor from outside, speeches are frequently given to the guest. In such cases the speech is likely to be written beforehand and read aloud at the meeting, and the guest will then receive the speech in the written form afterwards. The speech will be carefully folded and put into an envelope before being handed over.

At the end of 2010, mobile phones had largely supplanted some types of letters, for example, those summoning people for a meeting. Mobiles had created new ways to communicate

more efficiently. People frequently used mobile phones, which were generally accessible. Four different mobile phone networks were available in the area and the coverage seemed to reach most areas. When people could afford to load their sim cards and were able to charge their batteries, mobile phones offered quick and effective communication. For those who couldn't afford a mobile of their own, there were kiosks offering mobile services. Mobiles were used mainly orally; the few mobile messages that were observed were mainly of the dominated type.

In the last decade the importance of computers and the Internet has also increased in the area. However, due to lack of resources and lack of reliable connections, the use of e-mail for sending and receiving letters was still low in 2010. Apart from one Internet café in the district center, Kayanga, which can take six customers at one time, there are few connections. The only type of literacy practices of the dominant type using e-mail, that was observed, consisted of school results from university and secondary school. However, those who needed access to these had great difficulty finding them due to the lack of suitable connections. Instead, students received their school results through mobile telephones. Different offices, NGOs, and private persons have tried to connect themselves, but still the access is not readily available or reliable. The district library, run by an NGO, was about to finish the connection for three computers to be made available for common use at the time of the field study. Short courses in the use of computers are run by different organizations and interest is high. The desire for computers and Internet connections was high at the time of the latest field study, but the material resources were still limited. Internet access was barely available outside the two big towns. Due to the low availability in official settings I think that e-mails were most frequently sent as letters of this semi-dominant type of communication internationally.

That there was great demand among the inhabitants for access to computers and the Internet can be exemplified by a teacher in his sixties who lives in a remote area, has little experience using a typewriter and nearly no experience with computers. Still, he got himself an e-mail address in 2009 and started to communicate by e-mail whenever he happened to visit the central town. When asked about the reason for using the Internet he said that he wanted to keep up with the times and learn new ways to communicate. However, as he lived far from the center, this did not offer him more convenient or quick forms of interaction, when compared to ordinary mail.

### **Secret letters and written messages**

Letters and written messages are also frequent forms of dominated literacies that are private and personal. Contrary to the two other types of letters, these are not usually put into envelopes, usually due to lack of money or for convenience, but are instead folded carefully, with the name of the addressee usually written on the outside. These letters are delivered personally, carried to the recipient by a friend or a child. Letters delivered by a messenger are often sealed with adhesive tape. These letters usually contain nonstandard writing, such as spelling that does not follow norms, and often also code-switching in two or more languages. The messages or letters often contain information about topics such as health issues or requests for support in one form or another, frequently financial. Such messages may also be delivered orally, but in those cases they are seldom secret. Although a messenger may be well aware of the content of the message, a secret message would most likely be in written form. This is the case with the following message, which was delivered to the researcher late one afternoon. (The translation does not include all nonstandard features, as this would require too much explanation and is not that relevant in this case.)

<p>To My sister Āsa (address written following norm to the right)</p> <p>Nina furaha isiyo na kipimo. Salamu na baada ya salamu shikamoo dada Āsa. Sisi wazima wakutosha</p> <p>Namatumaini kwa wewe hujambo natena uko mzima wakutosha kwelikweli. Ninaanza kuyamwaga machache kidogo tuna tenakama mvua ya lashalasha. Kweli dada ninajua kwamba jumapili atukuja<sup>iii</sup> kwaiyo ninaomba samahani. Mimini me amua kuandika barua mimi unaye niona sina baba wala mamakwaiyo wewe ninakuona kama wazaziwangu wote ninaomba uninunulie vitu vifuata vyo. Kitambaa, vitenge viwili unishone e, siketi mbili, tisheti tatu vyote vyamtumba, Begi ya sanduku ganuni mbili zamtumba, Andasiketi <i>nakandambili na surwale. Wako neema wangu.</i> XXX (<i>signing</i>)<sup>iv</sup></p> <p>(Second page)</p>	<p>To My sister Āsa</p> <p>I am happy without end. Greetings and after the greetings shikamoo<sup>vi</sup> sister Āsa. We are well enough</p> <p>I hope that you are ok and also that you are well enough really. I start with some small matters we have like it's raining cats and dogs.<sup>vii</sup> Really, sister I know that on sunday we did not come Therefore I ask you to forgive me. I have decided to write a letter I whom you see here I have neither father nor mother therefore I see you as both my parents I ask you to buy me the following things. Cloth, two vitenge<sup>viii</sup> and have them sewn for me, two skirts, three T-shirts all second hand, suitcase, two dresses second hand, underskirt <i>and slippers and trousers. Yours you my grace</i> XXX</p>
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<p>Mimi nakuomba ukubali uniambie bila bibi<sup>v</sup>  kusiikia nikiwa peke yangu kwaiyo nitashukuru  sana ten asana yani</p> <p><b>Oshomeo oshekeo oshemelelwe</b></p>	<p>I ask you to agree to tell me without grandma  listening when I am alone therefore I will be  very grateful really</p> <p><b>Read<sup>ix</sup> a little laugh a little and enjoy</b></p>
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This letter, which was handed to me personally by the writer, a 13-year-old girl in standard five, illustrates the connection between secrets and economic matters. It has many examples of nonstandard spelling (for example “ganuni” for *gauni*, “lashalasha” for *rasharasha*, “kwaiyo” for *kwa hiyo*), nonstandard word borders (“wakutosha” for *wa kutosha*, “tunatenakama” for *tuna tena kama*) and nonstandard use of punctuation and capital letters. Also nonconventional are the uses of “siketi” for *sketi* (skirt) and “andasiketi” (underskirt). It is notable that the writer uses three languages. The greeting is in English, a way both to show that she knows English and to show politeness towards me, the European woman who is supposed to use English as her first language. The use of Runyambo at the end is not conventional as Runyambo is usually not used in writing in settings where the writer wants to impress or persuade, as this girl clearly wants to do. However she knows that I am particularly interested in Runyambo and reading and writing in that language. Thus this may be a way for her to try to persuade me. That she is not sure how to relate to me is clear in how she addresses me: “To my sister,” and “shikamoo dada,” where I’m addressed as an elder sister, and “ninakuona kama wazazi wangu wote” (I see you as both my parents). My understanding is that she is trying to position herself as my friend; a friend in need of help.

The reason she stressed that I should answer her without her caretaker's knowledge became clear to me when she actually left home shortly after. She ran off and was not found again. That was probably why she wanted a suitcase. Thus this letter was probably in her plan to find herself what she perceived as a better future, that is, to resist the authority of "bibi," her caretaker. Note the risk she takes by asking me not to reveal the communication to her caretaker, "bibi," who is a close friend of mine and the one in the household that I was going to visit the following Sunday. In this case "bibi" is also my superior as she is perceived to be of higher rank than I am.

Messages may also include private notebooks that people keep. In many homes a type of diary is kept in which the dates for important occasions are written down, such as marriages or important national events. It is also common to keep an "echitabo cho bosika," a book of inheritance, where instructions about the distribution of belongings after the death of an adult or elderly person are written down. One example was the notebook kept by an old woman in a family where she had thoroughly set out in writing how she wanted her belongings to be divided when she passed away. She also used this book to handle emotions so that when she perceived that she had been treated badly she sat down and wrote down changes she wanted to make in the inheritance and the reasons why. This book she kept secretly and made sure nobody had access to it, although she also made sure everybody was aware of the book, the content, and the changes she made. In this case one may say that she used the book not only to handle her feelings but also to influence what happened around her and to make sure she was well treated, a complex mix of secrecy and claiming authority.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to show how letters, as a genre of literacy, are used in Karagwe in relation to authority and secrecy. I wanted to create an understanding of how “processes and techniques associated with literacy and schooling” (Street 1993:27) are used in relation to local communicative patterns and conventions. It becomes clear that in the case of Karagwe, people who live here are insulated, through economic, geographic and political factors among others, from the flow of information technology that is obvious in so many other settings all over the globe. However it becomes obvious that people have taken hold of literacy as a tool for manifesting, resisting, and claiming authority, which is an important aspect of social life in the area. Literacy in the form of letters and messages plays an important role in the negotiation of authority and is used both in accordance with official norms, as represented in official settings and explicitly taught in schools, and in ways adapted to local perceived communicative needs. Through the studies it became clear that the hierarchical system, as a representation of the perception of authority, is an important source of the secrecy that is so frequent in the area. People of higher status use literacy of the dominant type to demonstrate and manifest their authority while people of lower rank, such as poor people, women, and young persons, may try to achieve power through the use of the same types of literacy. In Karagwe, resistance seldom appears in the form of open rebellion, which is perceived as dangerous as punishment is often strong, but rather in more hidden forms. Secrecy may then be seen as a result of the hierarchy as it offers opportunities that are perceived as less dangerous than open rebellion, although by definition it has restricted effects as it is secret.

The social and cultural roles that literacy plays become even more obvious when considering the importance of messengers, mainly children who are sent with letters and written messages. Through this practice children are socialized into both social structures of rank and

communicative structures of secrecy. This way children are included in literacy activities long before they write or read on their own. Thus one may say that they are socialized into an active literacy voice through the passive voice they may be said to exercise when delivering written secret messages.

Changes due to digital media, such as mobiles and the Internet, seemed at the end of 2010 to concern mainly the literacies of semi-dominant and dominated types, the types of literacy practices used in semi-private and private life. As computers with Internet connections were not commonly available, the use of e-mail for sending and receiving letters was neither frequent nor reliable. E-mails collected and observed in the study included mainly letters of the semi-dominant type. Thus official letters of the dominant type in traditional paper form and sent by ordinary mail still hold a strong position due to the low reliability of digital media. The mobile telephone was the digital medium that people had incorporated into most in their lives, mainly in private life but also in semi-private life, connected to interest groups and personal finance.

Thus it became clear that people have taken hold not only of literacy but also of digital media, although to a lesser extent, to construct, manifest, and resist authority, and that secrecy holds a central place in this. Mobiles may have taken some of the roles of written letters in private matters and on a group level while, although computers are used for writing letters of different types, the use of digital media to send written messages, either by the Internet or as sms messages, is still rare compared to letters in paper form. No cases of political rebellion, for example, of the type seen during 2011 in different parts of the world, were observed. The low availability and reliability of digital media does not provide such opportunities in this setting. Another factor may be that computers are barely available at all among groups who are perceived to be of low status.

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<sup>i</sup> The royal clan had relatives, for example, among the Kinyankole in what is now Uganda. This continued through colonial times so that royal children were sent to boarding schools in Uganda.

<sup>ii</sup> In one case I observed a nine-year-old girl being sent by foot 45 kilometres with a letter. She then stayed in that home for two months before she was sent back.

<sup>iii</sup> It is unclear what she means here. She has written: “atukuja”, which could mean *you will come* (utakuja) but it is more likely to be a common misspelling for *hatukuja* (we did not come). Dropping of initial /h/ is common in Swahili spoken and written by Banyambo).

<sup>iv</sup> Words in italics were written in the left margin. Words in bold are in Runyambo.

<sup>v</sup> “Grandma” (bibi) is here used for the woman with whom she is living.

<sup>vi</sup> “Shikamoo” is the Swahili greeting word to someone of higher rank. In homes and to elders the greeting would be in Runyambo: *Mba!*

<sup>vii</sup> A possible translation could also be: *Let me pour out a few matters like a drizzle*. (Thanks to Prof. Rugemalira for this comment.)

<sup>viii</sup> A certain type of cloth for dresses and skirts.

<sup>ix</sup> “Oshomeo” may also mean *eat some soup/sauce*.

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