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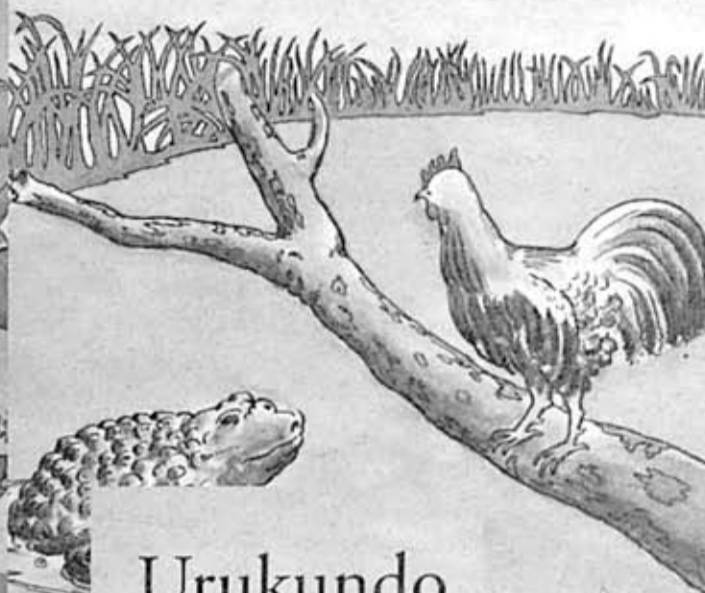
John Kilaka



Editions Bakame

N° 14

Yifuje ubwiza ...



Urukundo mu cyaro



Edition Bakame aims to get kids reading early with colorful titles and characters.

Publisher aiming at Rwandan children to create a reading culture

HELEN MWIHOLEZE

It is a well-known fact that Rwandans do not have a reading culture. But one local book publisher is trying to do its part to get Rwandans reading when a love of the printed word can be instilled: when the reader is young.

Edition Bakame, a publishing house for children's books, also organizes workshops and seminars for teachers, teacher trainees, authors of children's books and illustrators.

Agnes Gyr-Ukunda, the founder of Edition Bakame, says it is important to publish children's books in Kinyarwanda.

"Rwandans have no reading culture, so we have to encourage children to do it when they are still young," she said.

Ms. Gyr-Ukunda said she started her publishing house immediately after the Genocide so that Rwandan children could find some joy in their lives again. When children read something interesting, they can forget the past and start recalling what they read.

"When children read these books, they laugh and become happy. They forget the Genocide," Ms. Gyr-Ukunda said.

READING STARTS EARLY in most developed countries because children are introduced to stories that capture their attention with catchy rhymes, compelling stories and colorful illustrations, she said.

"Reading has to start in the language that every person can understand and relate to. Otherwise a child may be confused or alienated," Ms. Gyr-Ukunda added.

An added advantage of reading in one's language at an early age, says Ms. Gyr-Ukunda, is that as children grow, they master their native tongues.

"And children who master their mother tongue are also those who learn any foreign language with ease," she said.

Other advantages, she added, are that when reading becomes a habit children find learning other subjects easier. Reading is a life-long skill that permits a person to continue learning

long after leaving school.

"We encourage children to read, because a person who reads and writes well is a person who is informed," she said.

Ms. Gyr-Ukunda says her publishing house has many programs for children to help them improve their writing and reading skills.

"Children from different schools in Kigali participate in workshops where they can polish their writing in the three languages: Kinyarwanda, English and French," she said.

During a four-day workshop organized and sponsored by Edition Bakame in Remera last month, teachers, teacher trainees and authors and illustrators of children's books were trained on how to write children's books.

The workshop was conducted by Baobab Children's Book Fund, a Swiss organization, and led by Helen Schaer and Sonja Matheson. Ms. Schaer said reading is one of the most important things a child can be taught. But, she added to the gathered professionals, there is one downside

to it: reading can be used as a propaganda tool, or as a device to spread stereotypes.

SHE GAVE EXAMPLES of the harmful things that used to be written in European children's books. Children developed negative images of people from Africa, Asia and Latin America as a result of reading these books.

Africans were portrayed and illustrated as people with big, round eyes, massive earrings and always happy. Mostly, they sat around a big pot of soup which a white man was preparing for them. Arabs were shown on horses without saddles with knives between their teeth.

The books about colonies, when colonialism existed, were books about white heroes in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

"These books," said Ms. Schaer, "served as propaganda for the growing imperialism and the colonial policy."

She said publishing all such imagery in children's books ended in the 1960s in Switzerland when

Baobab Children's Book Fund was founded.

"Now each book is read and discussed before it's presented to children and the young reader," said Ms. Matheson.

She added that teachers should take the time to explain symbols, themes and metaphors buried deep in children's books. Most children's literature comes with a meaning or a moral, and pointing these out to young children helps stimulate pupils to process and digest the words. It teaches them how to read more than just the words on the page.

Some of the teachers had some practical suggestions during the workshop however.

"There is a lack of libraries where children can go to read," said Janvier Michel, a teacher at SOS Children's Village-Kigali. "I am certain children would enjoy reading but there are no places to get books. It's really hard to tell children to read when they have nothing to read."