Choosing texts, media, and literature about Africa is a difficult task for school librarians who have not studied Africa in detail; however it is possible to evaluate the available materials on the basis of several important criteria. These include the authority of the author, the dates of preparation and publication, and the accuracy of illustrations. Blatant biases can be easily recognized, but attention should also be paid to the more subtle forms of bias in the use of stereotypes or evaluative labels to typify whole groups. Over half of the children's materials on Africa appear in publishers' series, most of which use a European conceptual framework in the discussion of economics, history, religion, and social life. Such a viewpoint distorts the presentation of African life and invites negative comparisons to western life. African materials should present the African perspective and values and avoid overgeneralization about this very diverse continent. Many of the available books are fiction or folklore for which there are additional considerations: the authenticity and provenance of the tale; and human dignity in characterization, dialog, and plot. A selected list of new materials is appended. (Author/SL)
Evaluating materials about Africa is a difficult task for most school librarians who have not studied about Africa in detail. Today I wish to discuss the reasons why evaluating materials about Africa are necessary, as well as some criteria which all of you can use in evaluating African materials. I will focus my discussion on 10 general criteria for evaluation which I usually discuss with elementary and secondary school teachers (see Appendix A), but I will add other criteria which are of particular interest to librarians. Although the criteria for evaluation which I will discuss are applicable to texts and audio-visual materials, as well as to children's books, I will cite primarily children's books as examples, since the time allotted for discussion is quite limited.

Librarians are usually concerned with building a balanced book collection. In building a collection of books about Africa, two kinds of balance which might be considered are the distribution of titles about African nation states and ethnic groups. No matter how hard you try to cover all African nations and ethnic groups, you cannot assemble a balanced collection of books. There are approximately 50 nation states in Africa (the precise number depends on whether you count only independent nation states or include colonies as well). However, there are no works of non-fiction...
in English on some of these nation states, including some which recently have been in the news, such as Guinea-Bissau and Mocambique, and including all of Spanish-speaking Africa. What you will find is that the majority of books are about English-speaking Africa, especially English-speaking West Africa; that there are some books on French-speaking Africa, but that half of them are about one country—Zaire (the former Belgian Congo); that there are almost no books on Portuguese-speaking and Spanish-speaking Africa. Regardless of how hard you try to build a geographically balanced collection on Africa, you will have a collection with a strong West African bias. The same holds true in regard to books about African ethnic groups. Although there are approximately 1000 ethnic groups in Africa, only 60 receive substantive coverage in children's books. (Substantive coverage means that a whole volume or large part of one volume has been written about them.) There are only 15 African ethnic groups about which there are several children's books and all of these ethnic groups live in English-speaking Africa or Zaire.

Building a balanced collection of children's books may not be possible, but it is possible to evaluate those books which are available in relation to their accuracy and the authenticity of their representation of Africa. Evaluation of children's materials about Africa is necessary not only for selecting which materials to purchase, but also for recommending how the materials acquired should be used by teachers and students.
An important factor to consider in evaluating materials about Africa is the authority of the author, for the majority of persons who write children's materials about Africa lack expertise on Africa. It is important to know how the author acquired his or her knowledge about Africa. If the knowledge came from written sources, were they written for a popular or scholarly audience? If the knowledge came from personal experience in Africa, how long did the person travel or live in Africa and what was the purpose of his or her visit? In addition, it is important to know the author's primary field of interest and reasons for preparing the materials (to convert people to Christianity, to write an exciting adventure story, to find a source for publishing his or her art work, for example). Investigating the author's background provides clues about the probable reliability of the materials and the potential biases which might be present.

The date of both publication and preparation of materials about Africa should be examined. The rapid increase in demand for materials in the 1960s has resulted in the reprinting of older materials which were out-of-date at the time of their reissue or which contained strong overt biases characteristic of earlier periods of writing about Africa. Therefore, it is important to check the copyright date as well as the publication date for all materials. Because of international ownership of publishing companies or agreements between publishing companies in different nations, some books are published in another country before they are issued in
the U.S. This means, for example, that social studies and history books which are up-to-date at the time they are issued in Great Britain may be out-of-date several years later when they are released in the U.S. Therefore, what appears to be a new book does not really contain current information.

Closely related to the factor of the date when materials are prepared and published is the factor of what and how much is changed in revised editions, especially of historical and social studies materials about Africa. In general, revised editions often change only statistical materials and make few revisions in the text. For example, the 1973 revised edition of Ghana in the Visual Geography Series still represents Nkrumah as a national leader (although he is dead) and does not include government changes implemented by the new military government which replaced Nkrumah's successor.

You do not need to be an expert on Africa to evaluate revised editions of books. Since change in Africa is very rapid, if you find books with only statistical revisions, but without textual revisions, it would be fairly safe to conclude that the new edition is not worth purchasing, since there are reference books which provide current statistical information.

It should be pointed out in relation to this discussion of dates of publication and revision of books, that it is not possible to have a collection of children's books on Africa which is up-to-date. Non-fiction books on Africa
have been prepared at many times during the last 15 years. Many books published in the 1960s have not been revised, but there are no more recent books which cover similar topics.

Illustrations are another aspect of children's books on Africa which should be evaluated, since they teach as much about Africa as the text, if not more for younger children who are new readers or non-readers. There are several kinds of problems regarding illustrations which should be mentioned. Because an attempt is made to publish books as cheaply as possible, photographs are often taken from free sources (such as the UN, government information agencies, travel bureaus and books whose copyrights have expired), and used to illustrate a newly written text. Often when photographs from such sources are used, they represent a different time period from that discussed in the text or a different cultural context from that mentioned in the text. In drawn illustrations there seems to be a very common stereotype of tropical illustrations depicting palm trees, thatched houses and nearly naked dark-skinned children. Not only do such illustrations depict little of the great diversity of Africa, they also misrepresent Africa when they are included in books about non-tropical Africa. Drawn illustrations also often include a very large imaginative element, since most illustrations are drawn by artists who are trying to be creative rather than representing Africa realistically. Gail Haley, for example, received the Caldecott medal for her imaginative illustrations in A Story, An African Tale, but these drawings depict
African people in a stereotyped manner (which is especially offensive in the animated film made from the book), and take great liberties with the West African art motifs upon which they are based. Good art does not necessarily lead to an authentic representation of Africa in book illustrations.

Blatant biases about Africa are often easy to recognize in children's books about Africa when words like "inferior savage", to which most people today are highly sensitized, are used. However, there are other kinds of blatant biases which are equally as detrimental, but less easy to recognize because they are built into the structure of the materials and are related to basic assumptions which many people have never thought of questioning. The use of evaluative labels to categorize African nations or types of African behavior is a type of blatant bias. Why are African nations categorized as backward and underdeveloped? Backward and underdeveloped in all ways, at all times, in relation to all other nations? Why are African religions categorized as primitive? Certainly they do not represent the type of religion practiced by early man, nor are they lacking in complexity or specialization. Why are African dwellings called huts instead of houses or homes? The use of evaluative labels in generalizations about Africa and Africans is another type of blatant bias. Frequently Africans are said to be "uneducated". This label really means that they lack formal schooling of a western type and is related to a western assumption that there is an inherent difference in quality between formal schooling.
and informal education. In fiction a subtle kind of blatant bias is having African characters speak in English which is ungrammatical or like baby talk; this leaves the impression that Africans are incapable of speaking properly. In fact, the opposite is the case in many African ethnic groups which highly value eloquent speech. Yet this eloquence is almost never depicted in fiction for children.

Over half the children's materials about Africa appear in publisher's series. These include such book series as Portraits of Nations, Art Of, Getting to Know, Understanding Your World and First Book among 90 others. The prevalence of children's book series makes an examination of their aims essential, for all of these book series, including Enchantment of Africa, have conceptual frameworks which were developed without any consideration of what is important in Africa or to Africans. Simply stated, most children's book series which include volumes about Africa have a Eurocentric conceptual framework. The concepts which are used for organizing the books are those ordinarily used in discussing twentieth century European nation states. Data about Africa is discussed in relation to these categories with the result that African life is often misrepresented and that more is often told about what Africans lack than what Africans have. For example, most social studies surveys discuss the economy of nation states. The focus of the discussion is on the national economy (imports, exports, monetary exchange, etc). But in all African nation states the subsistence economy is the most important sector of the economy. To relegate the
discussion of the subsistence economy to a few sentences or to ignore it, as do the majority of children's books on Africa in series, is to distort the depiction of the African nation's economy. Likewise, to catalogue all the aspects of the economy which European nation states have but African nation states lack, such as electricity, extensive transportation networks and extensive credit institutions, is not very informative. African nation states do have means of creating energy, traveling and borrowing and lending, but children's books in series rarely mention them. If there were time, examples of the distortions and inaccuracies introduced into children's books on Africa by the use of Eurocentric concepts in other areas such as history, religion, politics, art and social life could be discussed.

A factor of great importance to consider in evaluating children's materials about Africa is over-generalization. Over-generalization is probably the largest single source of error in children's materials about Africa, and it becomes increasingly important in materials written for younger children. Over-generalization occurs in statements to the effect that all Africans or all people in a particular ethnic group or nation state are alike in certain ways. Africa is a very diverse continent and any time you see all-encompassing statements about the continent, a country or an ethnic group, you should immediately be suspicious. Over-generalization also is common in titles which are far more general than the contents of the books. For
example, most materials about Southern Africa are about South Africa and Rhodesia. Yet Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia and Swaziland are also in Southern Africa. These countries are often ignored or mentioned only in passing in books on Southern Africa, but they differ significantly in history, politics, economics and culture from South Africa and Rhodesia.

Many kinds of invidious comparisons are included in children's materials about Africa. It is important to recognize them, since they usually introduce a negative bias into the material. One form of invidious comparison is the use of Eurocentric concepts in discussing African nation states. The use of these concepts results in evaluating Africa in relation to Europe, rather than discussing Africa in its own context. Other forms of invidious comparisons ignore the historical context. For example, African democracies which are less than a decade old are compared to American democracy which is nearly two centuries old. Invidious comparisons are also one-sided, as when things which Africans lack (washing machines, electric lights, indoor plumbing) are named without any mention of what Africans have (methods of washing clothes, means of creating artificial light, bathing and lavatory facilities). The comparisons are also one-sided in the sense that what Africans have which non-Africans lack is rarely if ever mentioned. All such comparisons are invidious because they lack balance and leave the young reader with negative impressions about Africa.
Despite much recent research about African history, children's books rarely include African history in their historical discussions. In evaluating children's materials about Africa it is important to be able to distinguish between African history and European or colonial histories of Africa. The overwhelming majority of histories in children's books about Africa tell what outsiders did to Africa, not what Africans were doing. The histories begin with Middle Eastern or European contacts with Africa millennia after African history began. They emphasize the discovery and conquest of Africa by outsiders, not what the Africans were doing other than encountering the outsiders. Those few books which include some African history typically cover only large African states in the pre-independence period and ignore the majority of African people who lived in stateless societies. The incompleteness of the context in which historical materials about Africa is presented reinforces the erroneous notion that Africa has no history and distorts the presentation of African traditions which underlie contemporary life.

Closely related to the need for evaluating the historical context in which data about Africa is presented in children's books, is the need for evaluating the perspective of change which is presented. Just as Africa and Africans are usually presented as historyless, so are they usually presented as changeless. Very often it is said that Africans do things
exactly as their ancestors or that a particular African ethnic group has not changed for a specified number of years, usually numbered in the thousands. Yet there is abundant evidence available to prove the falsity of such statements. In addition, statements about change usually focus on technological change in the twentieth century, rather than on change in all facets of life over time. Furthermore, contexts of change in which Africa was changing more rapidly than Europe are rarely mentioned in children's books. In the discussion of change in Africa in children's materials there is a compounding of several of the previously-mentioned weaknesses of the materials, including Eurocentric frameworks, incomplete historical contexts, over-generalization and invidious comparisons.

A final general factor to use in evaluating children's materials about Africa is whether the material presents an African perspective on the topic or topics discussed. One needs only to ask whether African attitudes or values are presented as an integral part of the material or whether Africa and Africans are described in relation to non-African concepts or attitudes and/or evaluated by non-African values. This kind of evaluation is necessary, since very few children's books, except picture stories, attempt to present any kind of African perspective.

In concluding this discussion of evaluating children's materials about Africa, there are two kinds of books which I want to discuss in more detail. Approximately one-third of the children's books on Africa are folklore and one-half are
fiction. Therefore, discussing the evaluation of folklore and fiction about Africa is important in relation to the quantity of materials available. Most of the preceding comments apply to folklore and fiction, but there are other specific factors which should be considered in their evaluation.

How do you decide which of the many volumes of folklore to add to your library collection? How do you recognize which volumes of folklore are most authentically African? A specific example can illustrate some of the factors to be considered. Gail Haley's *A Story, An African Tale* is typical of most volumes of written folklore for children. It is a simplified and destylized version of a folk tale that had been published in a book for adults. (Many of the folklore collections used as sources by children's writers were written around the turn of the century or early in this century by amateur folklorists such as missionaries and government officials. These sources are often inaccurate and biased strongly in the direction of animal tales which European audiences can easily understand.) A different version of the tale retold in Haley's book appears in Harold Courlander's *The Hat-shaking Dance*. If you compare these two versions of the tale you will find that the activities of the trickster hero are fully developed in Courlander's version, so that the cunning of the hero is evident. The cunning of the hero is of great significance to African audiences, but it is absent from Haley's simplified version of the tale. Also absent from Haley's version of the tale
are narrative features of folklore such as idioms, proverbs, ideophones, repetition and patterned beginnings and endings. Songs are the primary narrative feature included in Haley's tale, whereas Courlander's version includes more narrative features. Courlander's book has the additional strengths of providing explanatory notes on the tales separately from the tales, rather than interrupting the original narrative by incorporating them within the tale, as do many children's editions of African folk tales. Courlander also provides a pronunciation guide to African words, so that the tales can be told. Finally, it should be mentioned that Courlander is a professional folklorist who collected his tales from African narrators. His professional orientation directs him to record the tales in their entirety, rather than to record only what is interesting to him or what he thinks will be of interest to non-African readers.

In selecting books of folklore for a library collection, more needs to be considered than the authenticity of the folklore in each volume. There are many different kinds of African folklore, only a few of which appear in collections for children. The majority of children's books of African folklore are animal tales with morals. It will not be too difficult to find volumes of human adventure tales and songs removed from their narrative contexts. However, it will require special effort to include historical tales, dilemma tales, proverbs and riddles in a library collection, since there are very few children's books which include these types of African folklore. Even if all the types of
African folklore just mentioned are included in a library collection, children will be introduced to only a tiny sample of the diverse wealth of African folklore.

Although it may seem unfair to evaluate children's fiction in relation to how accurately and realistically it depicts Africa, it is necessary to do so, since children learn from fiction as well as non-fiction and impressions of reality which children gain from fiction are as long-lasting as impressions gained from other sources. Some of the factors which are especially useful for evaluating children's fiction about Africa already have been mentioned: how accurate are the facts about Africa, how authentic is the African setting and whether an African perspective is included. Other factors related to the characters, plot and illustrations also should be considered. Are the characters fully developed human beings, or stereotypes such as a chief's son or witch doctor, or used only to make a point, such as that friendships between persons of different races are possible? You will find very few human beings among the African characters in fiction for children, therefore, it is not surprising that in evaluating the depiction of African people in the illustrations, you will find caricatures of people more often than realistic people. Characterization is also developed through dialogue, so it is important to consider whether characters speak in ordinary English, a dialect of English, slang or ungrammatical English and whether their manner of speaking is appropriate to their position in African society. The degree to which the plot
is romanticized is another factor to consider. Is idyllic life in a village presented or are basic problems such as racism or political unrest ignored, glossed over or easily overcome by the characters? Finally, the over-all tone of the fiction should be noted, for often it is paternalistic or patronizing and thus casts a negative aura over whatever is depicted in the fiction.

When these criteria are applied to children's fiction, some very well-known children's writers receive low ratings. For example, both Elizabeth Coatsworth and Rene Guillot have received the Hans Christian Andersen Prize for their children's fiction, for both are master story-tellers, Coatsworth of highly imaginative stories and Guillot of exciting adventure stories. Yet each depicts Africa negatively in their fiction about Africa. Coatsworth writes of Africa the pristine and primeval in They Walk in the Night, and of Africa the savage in Ronnie and the Chief's Son. All of Guillot's many adventure stories occur in a dangerous jungle full of wild animals or a forbidding desert. The stories are populated by stereotyped characters such as hunters with animal cunning, ruthless chiefs and frenzied witch doctors, who engage in stereotyped actions such as dancing naked to throbbing tom-toms while wearing hideous, grotesque masks. The works of both authors strongly reinforce negative stereotypes of Africa which have been extant since the eighteenth century.

The children's authors who receive the highest ratings for their fiction about Africa are typically persons who have lived in Africa, gained empathy with African people
and consciously include realistic details in their fiction. Although Rene Guillot lived in Africa for over 20 years and learned much about hunting animals, he did not gain an empathy with African people which he could convey in his fiction. In contrast, Naomi Mitchison and Letta Schatz gained empathy with the people of Botswana and Nigeria where they lived and have included many details about daily life in their fiction. In fact, Naomi Mitchison's fiction about Botswana and South Africa is more realistic than other fiction as well as most non-fiction about these areas, for she incorporates both what is pleasant and unpleasant about life in Southern Africa in the background of her fiction.
Appendix A

A Short List of Factors to Use in Evaluating Materials

About Africa for Children

1. Authority of the author
   What is the source of the author's knowledge about Africa?
   ex. Kinds of written materials
   Length and type of personal experience
   What is the author's major field of interest?
   What is the author's purpose in preparing the materials?

2. Date of preparation and publication
   When was the book copyrighted?
   Was the book published in another country before it was published in the U.S.?
   What and how much has been changed in revised editions?

3. Accuracy and authenticity of illustrations
   Do illustrations represent the same time period as the text?
   Do illustrations depict the same geographic area and people named in the text?
   Are drawings realistic, stereotyped or highly imaginative?

4. Blatant biases
   Are evaluative terms used to categorize behavior?
   ex. primitive religion, backward country
   Are evaluative terms used in generalizations?
   ex. Africans are superstitious
   Is the speech of characters in fiction ungrammatical or truncated English?

5. Part of a series
   What is the conceptual framework of the series of which the material is a part?
   Does the series framework take into consideration what is of major importance in Africa and to Africans?
6. Over-generalizations

Are numerous universal statements made?

ex. All animist religions are alike

All Moroccans are warmhearted and outgoing

Are titles of materials representative of their content?

ex. A film called "Discovering the Music of Africa" is about the music of Southern Ghana

7. Invidious comparisons

Is the general framework of presentation Eurocentric?

Does the material focus on what Africans lack without discussing what they have?

8. Completeness of historical context

Is the history about what Africans did or about what Europeans and other outsiders did in Africa?

Does the history begin several million years ago, with Egyptian civilization or with the colonial era?

Does the history of African societies include all kinds of societies or only empires and states?

9. Perspectives of change

Are claims made that Africans have not changed for 10,000 or some other number of years?

Are Africans said to do things exactly like their ancestors?

Are all kinds of change discussed or only technological change?

Is change in Africa compared to change in other geographic areas at different historical periods?

10. African perspective

Are African attitudes and values presented?

Are Africans evaluated in relation to the attitudes and values of non-Africans?
Appendix B

Children's Books on Africa: A Selected List of Books
Published in 1973, 1974 and 1975

Twenty-one animal tales, many of which feature hare as trickster, from the Acholi of Uganda, an ethnic group which is rarely represented in folklore collections for children.

Carpenter, Allan et. al. *Enchantment of Africa Series*. Chicago: Children's, 1972- $5.00 per volume
When completed, the 42 volumes of this series will be the largest compendium of data about Africa written for children. While it does contain implicit biases and some factual errors, it provides the most up-to-date and comprehensive coverage on Africa of any American published children's book series. A detailed review of the series appeared in *Newsletter of the Southern Association of Africanists*, 3, 1 (Jan. 1975) 35-42

This historical and social studies survey is especially useful for its coverage of the Creole people; however, other ethnic groups are not covered well.

Of high quality like all Courlander's folk tale collections, this volume is especially useful because it contains a type of folklore which is rare in collections for children and because it directly relates African and Caribbean folk tales.

Even though the lives of 13 African women are over-idealized in this volume, it is the only source which provides details about some of the women of national importance in Africa today.


103 pages, illus. $5.95.

Fiction written in the style of an oral epic. While obviously a fantasy, it is well-grounded in historical and ethnographic facts.


A photo story about goats which depicts many aspects of life in a North African town. Appealing and educational.


unpaged, illus. $5.95 E

This Swahili alphabet book provides an opportunity to learn Swahili words and become familiar with a limited number of concepts related to East Africa.


$6.95 (cloth) $2.95 (paper) YA

A fictional biography of two Kpelle boys in Liberia which contrasts growing up closely adhering to Kpelle tradition with growing up as a partial participant in Liberian national institutions. It is based on long-term research among the Kpelle and accurately depicts cultural details. A set of color sound filmstrips *Three Spirits of Balama* ($60) depicts the village, forest and urban worlds in which the boys grew up.
No other children's book covers northwestern Nigeria in so much detail. A necessary supplement to other books which focus on the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa.

Johnson, Rhoda O. *Iyabo of Nigeria.* Claremont Graduate School, 1973. 79 pages, illus. $3.75
The fictional biography of a Yoruba girl in Nigeria which realistically depicts many aspects of Yoruba daily life not covered in other children's books.

Fiction about Botswana which provides more realistic impressions of contemporary life in Botswana than any book of non-fiction written for children.

A historical survey of sub-equatorial Africa, based on recent research, which is a valuable supplement to numerous recent books on West African states and empires. No other children's book provides as much detail on the African history of sub-equatorial Africa.

Fiction about a school boy in Uganda in the 1940s which provides realistic impressions of the processes of culture change in rural Africa.
A well-illustrated survey of crafts which includes in one source materials scattered among many social studies surveys for children.

unpaged, illus. -map $5.95
An elementary, illustrated introduction to the making and use of talking drums among the Ashanti of Ghana and Yoruba of Nigeria.

One of the more authentic collections of folk tales for children which is written in a format so the tales may be told, as well as read.

Folk tales which are sung by the Baganda; musical transcriptions are included. Excellent source for learning that folk tales are lively narratives related to many different cultural contexts.

**Sources Containing Reviews of Children's Materials by Africanist Experts:**

*Africana Library Journal* 1971-1973
*Conch Review of Books*, special issue to be published, Fall 1975
*Newsletter of the Southern Association of Africanists* 1974-
*Social Education*, special issue, February 1971
Appendix C

Africa: Materials on Display

African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin, Madison.


Field Museum. Selected African Calabash Design, Multi-Media Travel Pac. Reserve from Field Museum, Chicago, Education Department. 312-922-9410 ext. 288 or 364

