

Publishing in Africa: where are we now?

Part One: Some spurious claims debunked



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Thirty-five years ago at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) in Nigeria a major conference on publishing and book development in Africa, consisting of publishers, booksellers, librarians, writers, and scholars from many countries, reaffirmed their belief “that books are an indispensable cornerstone in education and that a nation’s book industry must be considered an essential industry in terms of national development planning”.

Brave words. Where are we now?

The years immediately following the conference saw rapid development of some African book industries, but they were followed, in the 1980s, by years of crisis. In LOGOS, in 1990, I described Africa in those years “as largely a *bookless* society”. Happily, by the early 1990s, African publishing entered a period of recovery, transformation and innovation. In many countries economic liberalization, deregulation and privatization led to sweeping improvements in the book business. Privately owned companies could compete with, and sometimes succeed against, state-owned companies. Houses owned by multinationals were either nationalized or bought out by indigenous companies. This period of progress was spurred further by a great deal of new thinking on how to develop autonomous publishing, by recognition of the need for new approaches, and by improvements in professional standards. In recent years there has also been a growing trend toward pan-African and collective approaches to the many problems African publishers face.

But the climate for African book development has again deteriorated. Many of the initiatives started with high hopes in the late 1980s and early 1990s have been withheld or are dormant. The wave of enthusiasm has largely passed. There does not seem to be a great deal of energy left. The LOGOS archive contains over thirty articles on Africa, but nothing since 2003, an indication, perhaps, of this lack of energy. The conviction and hope of the early 1990s seem to have fizzled out. World aid agencies

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have backed away. Donor policies and priorities have shifted. The climate for funding of book programmes is becoming increasingly difficult.

In the meantime many parts of the African continent continue to be afflicted by progressively deteriorating economic conditions. Social, cultural and infrastructure problems abound. Low literacy levels, the multiplicity of languages, limited access to books and library services, poor transport and communications networks, severely under-funded educational systems, shortages of capital and skills — these are some of the obstacles that have always been cited as hindrances to the development of African publishing. They still are.

Publishing and book development in Africa have always been, and will continue to be, closely influenced by development in general. The book sector is inescapably tied to government policies or, in many countries, the lack of policies.

African publishing has not floundered for lack of enterprise, or publishing vision. Tired old arguments like putting the blame on domination by the multinationals are no longer valid. The main reason why the African book sector has not yet realized its potential is that very few governments have provided positive support for their book industries, or created environments conducive to writing, reading, and publishing. This despite endless pious pronouncements, over the last three decades or more, by government ministers or officials delivering yet another keynote address at a conference, or presenting an opening speech at a book fair, referring solemnly to the crucial role of books in development.

A sustainable system of book provision and book development, and a flourishing book industry, are possible only with government support that recognizes the strategic importance of publishing, and demonstrates this in official commitment in policies and budgets. There is little evidence of this thus far, although it is also fair to state that the marketplace has been liberalized, giving much greater participation to the private sector. Few government-controlled state publishing companies exist nowadays.

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Any attempt to analyze the state of the book industries in sub-Saharan Africa today must begin

with the wider picture of development on the continent.

The picture, sadly, is depressing. We've had the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), Bob Geldof's LiveAID, the G8 summit in 2005, the launch of initiatives such as the Commission for Africa and its gushing report, and the UN's Millennium Development Goals for poverty alleviation, but, far from meeting the criteria set by the UN to meet these goals, the intensity of poverty has in fact risen in most countries. Conflicts in Africa, according to OXFAM, have cost the continent £150bn since the end of the cold war, an amount equivalent to the total foreign aid received over the same period.

A few years ago there was a whiff of optimism when the reigns of some infamous African despots — and some of the grotesque manifestations of their power and wealth — were over. There was much excitement about the prospects of a new generation of enlightened African leadership, a new vision, an African renaissance, with more transparency, a shift to accountable government, and a resurgence of democracy. This has indeed happened in a few countries where democracy has taken hold and has been consolidated, and where corruption has been tackled seriously. There has also been significant progress in Africa in communications technology. Mobile phones, for example, can be said to have improved the daily life of ordinary people, and provided access to information, albeit still limited.

However, signs of enlightened and progressive new leadership are few and far between. Repression remains widespread. Africa's tortured history continues, with political instability and conflict, religious or racial strife, deep ethnic divisions, widening inequity, and poverty of the most appalling dimensions. Climate change and rocketing global food prices will cause even more acute food shortages, and are likely to lead to starvation and disease on a colossal scale. The poor will go even hungrier, while those in power will gorge on the honey pot that is the state and live lives of luxury, while squandering their countries' resources on wasteful and ill-conceived projects. Much foreign aid continues to be frittered away, is lost or stolen, and doesn't get through to the people it is meant to be helping.

Sub-Saharan Africa, for the most part, still suffers from abysmal leadership, although there are

regimes elsewhere in the world which are as bad, if not worse. While in many countries African leaders and their extended families continue to flaunt the trappings of wealth, the countries over which they rule have some of the lowest levels of expenditure on health and education and, by extension, on books and learning materials. According to World Bank figures, half of sub-Saharan Africans continue to live in extreme poverty, a figure which has not changed since 1981.

Meantime the blame game about Africa's woes continues. There are basically two main strands of thought here. One says it's all due to tribalism, poor leadership, endemic corruption, the ill-gotten gains of an elite few, and flight capital stashed away in foreign bank accounts. The other argues that it is essentially due to imperialism, or neo-imperialism, the result of Africa's repressive colonial past, the continent's exploitation by Europe and the West, and that unfair trading systems, or, more recently, misguided Western donor policies, are to blame, and that foreign aid has perpetuated a dependency culture.

As a Swiss with no colonial or ancestral guilt, I don't need to compensate for the sins of my forefathers. But whatever one's views, it is clear that only Africa's leaders and its people can solve the continent's enormous problems, and that until African statesmen or women provide enlightened leadership and meet their responsibilities — display visionary leadership of the kind that can articulate coherent political programmes for significant social transformation — nothing much will change and the situation will keep on deteriorating.

In Zimbabwe, for example, once the home of a thriving international book fair, President Robert Mugabe, almost single-handedly, has managed to completely destroy a once relatively prosperous country, inflicting hunger, dire poverty, and untold misery on its people, in the process severely damaging the image of the "new" Africa.

We have witnessed a colossal amount of hypocrisy. Most African politicians have been reluctant to criticize the flouting of human rights or other systemic abuses of power by their fellow leaders, dismissing criticism from the outside as unwarranted interference, as "misinformed", or pointing to excesses elsewhere in the world. Others remain reluctant to react, fearful of airing

their dirty linen to a Western public, a public, many argue, that has had a long history of bias against Africa and its people. Instead, it has been left to a number of African writers to act as voices of conscience. In a recent speech in South Africa, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka — a scourge for many years of successive Nigerian and other African despots and kleptocrats — said that President Mugabe was typical of the "rogues and monsters" that still cling to power in Africa, and that many African leaders oppress their people just as much as their former colonial rulers did.

In such an environment, what chance, then, for the book?

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Many of Africa's most venerable universities seem to be in a perennial state of crisis, have been allowed to crumble, and have forced some of the most distinguished African scholars to transfer their academic careers to universities in the countries of the North. Students have to put up with severely cramped dormitories and dreadful living conditions, and when they finally graduate it is likely that only about a third of them will be lucky enough to find work.

At least part of the reason for this is that international development policies, especially those of the World Bank, have for many decades favoured basic education at the expense of higher learning, and support for universities by successive African governments has had low priority. Although there are signs that donors and governments in some countries are now starting to spend more on higher education, and there has been a measure of support for some university libraries, many African universities (other than South African, and a few in one or two other countries) still present a picture of decay, with poor facilities for research, and inadequate and sometimes totally outdated library resources, which contributes significantly to the marginalizing of Africa-based scholars, and hardly encourages home-grown scholarly productions.

Nowhere is the need for revitalization keener than in Africa's public libraries, which have long been the main information source for the vast majority of literate Africans and a refuge for those seeking knowledge. But during the last twenty years or more libraries across the continent have

declined to a state of crisis. Many public libraries, even national library boards, are in a state of shocking neglect, with leaking buildings, totally inadequate funding, not to mention pitiful book acquisitions budgets. A large number of them are almost exclusively dependent on acquiring new books through overseas donation programmes. Only a small number of them have computerized their operations and can offer access to online catalogues, adequate IT facilities, and computer terminals for access to fast Internet connections. When they have received support for improvement of library services, this has primarily come from the outside, from donors and foundations. Libraries in schools are unheard of in most African countries.

The development of bibliographic and reference resources by national library boards, such as books-in-print or book trade directories, has also been negligible. More than twenty countries in Africa still have no national bibliography, and in many other countries they are dormant or seriously in arrears in their publication schedules, some by several years, or even decades, although one welcome development is that for a small number of sub-Saharan countries (Ethiopia, Mauritius, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa) recent issues of national bibliographies can now be freely downloaded online.

African governments have offered little support for creative writing like sponsorship of book prizes and awards, writers' workshops, or professional training, much less support for publishing outlets. By comparison, in England the Literature Department of the Arts Council has provided funding for Ghanaian-born publisher Becky Ayebia Clark (now resident in the UK) to assist her Ayebia Literary Agency and Publishing (www.ayebia.co.uk/) — a new imprint launched in 2003 that specializes in quality African and Caribbean writing — to become independent and more commercially viable. Such support is unheard of in Africa.

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The compilation of *Publishing, Books & Reading in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Critical Bibliography* (www.hanszell.co.uk/pbrssa/index.shtml) provided an opportunity to examine the very substantial body of literature that has been written on the topic over the last two decades and more, a good proportion of it now available online, and much of it freely accessible.

While the bibliography provides access to many important, some even seminal, contributions to the literature on publishing and book development in Africa, a great deal of it is still characterized by far too much generalization.

There have been dozens of articles recently containing sweeping, mostly unsubstantiated statements to explain the current unsatisfactory state of the book industries in Africa.

Spurious claim No 1

- *The multinationals still dominate African publishing, and publish few or no books of interest and relevance to the majority of African people.*

Walter Bgoya, who heads his own publishing company in Tanzania, Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, has written extensively and eloquently about the state of the book and book development on the continent. However, I am at odds with some of his views expressed in an article in *Pambazuka News*, "Africa and Publishing: Reflections" (see www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/28874). Bgoya challenges the fact that publishing in Africa is developing, just because more books are being published today than two decades ago, and there has been a proliferation of indigenous publishing houses. He believes that the development has been more quantitative than qualitative and that this is not a measure of a publishing industry. He writes:

Behind the backwardness of the publishing industry is a history of inappropriate educational and cultural policies, absence of national book policies including ineffective copyright laws, high duties and taxes on paper and other printing inputs, no or underfunding of libraries. Book production and distribution cannot prosper in societies where reading is limited to functionality — passing school and professional examinations.

These are all valid points, but Bgoya also contends that publishing in Africa remains an enclave industry serving foreign multinationals and their joint ventures, "which are actually comprador companies, established to legitimize the former's presence and exploitation."

He declares that “there is little or no publishing of books of interest and relevance to the majority of the people.” This is a puzzling assertion when one looks at Bgoya’s own Mkuki na Nyota Publishers website (see www.mkukinanyota.com/). Over 150 titles in English and Kiswahili are on offer here, and a most impressive list it is too, of academic, educational, general and childrens’s titles, as well as dictionaries, books on the environment, travel guides, many titles on East African and Tanzanian arts and culture, scholarly titles in the social sciences, biographies, legal books, school books, as well as children’s picture story books. Mkuki na Nyota states that its mission is “to publish relevant, beautiful and affordable books for the local and regional markets and quality competitive books for the overseas market.” So how does one reconcile this with the claim that there is little or no publishing of books of interest to the majority of the people? What’s going on here? How is it possible that such an enterprising indigenous publisher can exist, and apparently prosper with a constantly expanding and diverse list, when the market is still completely dominated by the multinationals?

Another article typical of the kind of sweeping assertions that are being made comes from Francis Nyamnjoh, who heads the Department of Publication and Dissemination of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research (CODRESIA) in Dakar. In his paper “Globalization and the Cultural Economy: Africa” he argues that African cultural production does not attract sufficient attention from cultural entrepreneurs “who are mostly white and located in the global North, unwilling to risk profitability through investing in cultures that are largely perceived to be socially inferior, economically uncompetitive and located in ‘hearts of darkness’ difficult to penetrate.” He goes on to say (repeating the Bgoya claim above almost verbatim):

There is little or no publishing of books of interest and relevance to the African majority, and of those that are published, most are by multinational publishers who target the elite few who can read and write European languages and who — for economic, cultural or political reasons — reproduce work informed by a global hierarchy of creativity in which Africans are perceived to be at the very bottom.

This is not only unnecessarily negative, but also quite untrue. For example, what about the publishing output of the 116 independent and autonomous African publishers from nineteen countries who are currently distributed by the African Books Collective (ABC) in Oxford? (See [www.africanbookscollective.com.](http://www.africanbookscollective.com/)) ABC stocks titles in fifty-six subject disciplines and adds 150 new titles to its inventory each year “with an emphasis on scholarly and academic books, literature, and general culture titles”. Even a cursory look at ABC’s website shows that there are plenty of culturally relevant books here, published by Africans, for Africans, but also of interest to a wider audience and the international market place.

Had Francis Nyamnjoh bothered to consult the subject index of the latest edition of *African Books in Print* he would have discovered a wealth of culturally relevant books, as well as listings, for example, of some 3,500 African literature titles in English and French, almost 2,500 African-published children’s books, not to mention details of more than 10,000 books in 140 African languages, including fiction, drama and poetry, non-fiction, children’s literature, and easy reading for adults. True, compared with the book production output of some countries in the North the figures are relatively modest, but there is no denying that significant progress has been made.

One need only look at the websites of a number of enterprising small independent African publishers to demolish the myth that there is no general publishing. For example, the Lagos-based Kachifo Limited (www.kachifo.com/), founded in 2004 by Muhtar Bakare, aims to publish high-quality yet affordable books on Africa, written by Africans, offering them to a global audience. It publishes literary fiction, popular fiction, textbooks, coffee-table books and general interest as well as children’s books. Over a short period of time the imprint has built a reputation of excellence as an outlet for high-quality contemporary African writing. The Kachifo website offers access to its list in 20 languages, and book prices are listed in 19 currencies — if that is not enterprising then what is? They even have a Wiki entry!

In his conclusions Nyamnjoh claims that, although African publishing is heavily reliant on school textbooks,

the lion's share of subventions for and business in such projects goes directly to multinational publishers or their local affiliates. Yet these multinational publishers are less keen on investing some of the profit made into developing the local publishing industry, local content and/or promoting publishing in local languages. The disadvantaged African publishers who are interested do not make enough from textbooks to venture into other aspects of publishing. This calls for policies that protect African publishers against uneven competition with established giants driven primarily by profitability.

The accusation that the multinationals are primarily driven by profitability begs the question: Are indigenous commercial publishers not also driven by profitability? Or are they all philanthropist undertakings? The fact remains that publishing general or cultural books in Africa is always a risky business, no matter who does it, for small markets in which many of those who want to read the books cannot afford to purchase them.

This is not to deny that, in certain countries, South Africa, for example, or much of francophone Africa, there is still a pre-eminence of powerful and well capitalized multinational companies. But compared with the picture two or three decades ago, when multinationals were perceived to be a threat to indigenous publishing development, the picture has changed quite dramatically. Anyway, large publishing conglomerates dominate publishing *globally*, and small independent publishers in the North also find it difficult to compete with the publishing giants.

Spurious claim No 2

- “There is nothing there”

There are also frequent statements of what one might call the “there is nothing there” variety. For example, Tainie Mundondo, current Executive Director of the African Publishers Network (APNET at www.apnet.org), is quoted in *The Book-seller* as being critical of book donation schemes:

The donor who is giving the book should buy it from local publishers. The only area

where books from the UK and Europe are good is at the tertiary level, where some of the universities follow an international curriculum. Few of the African publishers publish at that level as student numbers are low and it is not cost-effective.

A strange comment considering that there are in fact a substantial number of indigenous African publishers who have publishing programmes at the tertiary level. She goes on to say that “books from Europe are culturally not suitable” and adds “there is a need for local content and culture; books that are culturally relevant, morally relevant”, as if there was nothing available of this nature. This is just plain hogwash considering the very significant output of culturally highly relevant books coming from African presses all over the continent.

Tainie Mundondo also fails to mention, or is apparently not aware, that one of the major book charities, Book Aid International (BAI at www.bookaid.org), in association with ABC, some years ago launched the pioneering Intra-African Book Support Scheme, which provided a wide range of African-published books to African academic and public libraries. BAI has also supported other schemes that make available locally published books to African libraries, most recently its Intra-Africa Book Purchase Project. Intended to stimulate cross-border book purchasing within Africa, the project was funded by the UK government's Department for International Development and is operated through grants provided by BAI to national library services to enable purchase of African-published children's books from outside their own countries.

Spurious claim No 3

- *Most books for African children are still imported and are insensitive to local culture*

Some writers still insist today that there are hardly any books for children that reflect an African environment; that illustrations in locally produced children's books are of very poor quality, and that in any event most children's books are still imported and hence insensitive to local culture. Arthur Smith, for example, a senior lecturer in the Department of English at Fourah Bay College,

University of Sierra Leone makes this claim in his online article, published in 2008, on “The Present Situation for Writing and Publishing Creative Writing for Children in Africa”. (See <http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Present-Situation-For-Writing-And-Publishing-Creative-Writing-For-Children-In-Africa&id=752256>.)

This was true twenty-five years ago, since when African children’s book publishing has made huge strides. While there are still some children’s books that contain poor illustrations or are of sub-standard production quality, overall the picture has improved quite dramatically, in textual content and quality of illustrations. There are many African publishers with highly imaginative children’s lists, quite a few of them developed by enterprising African women publishers, several of whom have contributed articles to *Courage and Consequence. Women Publishing in Africa*, an insightful collection of papers and personal accounts published by African Books Collective in 2002.

Some examples of the quality and vitality of African children’s books today can be viewed at the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Books for Africa/Books from Africa Web pages at <http://www.ibby.org/index.php?id=552>. Presented on the occasion of the 29th IBBY Congress held in Cape Town in 2004, it features eighty-four children’s titles from Africa, for Africa. It includes picture-story books for small children, children’s fiction, folktales, and fiction for young adults, published in English, French, Afrikaans, and several African languages. The virtual exhibition displays the cover of each book, and extracts, together with a review and commentary about its contents. Additionally, there are profiles of the African authors, illustrators, and publishing houses whose books are included.

Spurious claim No 4

- *European and American booksellers and librarians have little interest in African scholarly output*

This astonishing allegation has been made in a number of papers. For example, Walter Bgoya, in his essay “Scholarly Publishing in Africa: An Overview”, claims that the international book market place “is only marginally interested in African books.” He says:

The predominant attitude of the European and American book trades from buyers to booksellers to librarians is at best to disregard African intellectuals’ output and at worst to deny any place in international knowledge production to Africa and the Africans.

Many Africana librarians would take issue with this claim. Professional groups such as the Africana Librarians Council of the [US] African Studies Association (www.library.upenn.edu/collections/africa/ALC/), or, in the UK, the Standing Conference on Library Materials on Africa (SCOLMA), (www.lse.ac.uk/library/scolma/) have long been strong supporters of indigenous African publishing. Bgoya’s assertion is also irreconcilable with the considerable success African Books Collective has enjoyed, for almost two decades, in getting some thousands of African-published books on to the shelves of academic and public libraries in many parts of the world. ABC have also enjoyed a measure of success in getting some major booksellers in the North to stock ABC-distributed titles, and has persuaded some international library suppliers to include African-published titles in their approval programmes.

The international market place is only “marginally interested” in the publishing output of many countries, not only books originating from Africa. A 2006 survey by the Association of Research Libraries, *Changing Global Book Collection Patterns in ARL Libraries*, analysing nearly 28.5 million records in a July 2004 snapshot of the OCLC WorldCat database (www.arl.org/bm~doc/grn_global_book.pdf), shows that North American library holdings of books from publishers in Africa are actually better than holdings from the Caribbean, East Asia, Oceania, and Southeast Asia.

Collection policies, not to mention budgetary constraints, in all US libraries, affect books not offered under US vendors’ approval programmes or not reviewed in Choice, or, for more general titles, in *Library Journal* and other major US library review media and book selection tools. Some US libraries are a bit insular and are reluctant to place orders for foreign imprints unless distributed in the US. But to suggest that the lack of interest in African-published books is due to some deep-seated prejudice, or a

deliberate attempt to deny a place for African knowledge production on the shelves of US academic libraries, is unfair and fanciful.

A sample search in WorldCat (www.worldcat.org/) shows that many scholarly titles distributed by African Books Collective are in an average of around 120 libraries. While this is lower than average holdings of scholarly titles published by US university presses, the figure is better than for scholarly books published in other regions outside North America, and comparable with many academic titles from some independent scholarly presses in Europe.

Spurious claim No 5

- “*African scholarship either remains unpublished or is published in the North*”

The African Books Collective recently published *African Scholarly Publishing Essays*, the editor of which, Zimbabwean scholar Alois Mambo, writes:

Over the past two decades, channels for publishing African scholarship in Africa have declined considerably. Consequently, African scholarship either remains unpublished or is published in the North.

This is yet another sweeping and unsupportable contention. The prestigious Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (www.nomaaward.org) — which honours outstanding scholarly, literary as well as children’s titles — has been presented twenty-eight times since it was first awarded in 1980, and almost half of the award winners have been African-published scholarly books. The publishing lists of some African publishers distributed by ABC reveal a very wide and diverse range of African scholarship. Moreover, African journals, while still facing obstacles, currently seem to be enjoying a period of resurgence, with a number of exciting new literary, cultural and scholarly titles commencing publication over the last few years. Many of these journals now receive international attention and dissemination through initiatives such as the African Journals Online (AJOL) project (www.ajol.info/), or are made available online through other collaborative national and international projects.

Halfway through his article Mambo concedes that “the publication of scholarly research in Africa has not been entirely non-existent” and mentions the work of the Dakar-based Council for the Development of Social Science Research (CODESRIA) as an example. Indeed, CODESRIA has over the years published a most impressive array of scholarly work, in both book and journal formats, attracting authors from all over Africa and the diaspora. CODESRIA has made a major contribution to academic publishing on the continent, and has played a vital role in the dissemination of African scholarship.

CODESRIA is of course a not-for-profit NGO and, like many NGOs with publishing activities, is heavily donor-supported. It is more difficult and risky for commercial publishers to venture into academic publishing, while publishing by African university presses has been severely curtailed because they depend on financial support from their parent institutions, and in most cases this has not been forthcoming because governments have drastically reduced their subventions. At the same time, many of the university presses that have been set up more recently have been ill-conceived, have been started without sufficient planning and skilled personnel, lack the autonomy to decide on their own on matters of policy and list building, and are usually hampered by slow-grinding university bureaucracies and slow decision-making. Most universities are still reluctant to fund publishing; and when they do there is pressure and unrealistic expectations by university administrators that the presses must become self-sustainable and must at least break even.

Unfortunately, despite various proposals and attempts to encourage cooperation between scholarly presses in Africa — nationally, regionally, or continent-wide — there is still little evidence of collaborative ventures. Other than in South Africa, few university presses have seized the opportunities of the digital revolution, new printing technologies such as print-on-demand, or publishing on the Internet, which could offer lower cost combined with much greater reach.

It is true that African scholarly book production is still relatively modest. Nonetheless, significant advances have been made, and a diverse range of high-quality African scholarly titles has

been published over the last decade or more. Many of them have enjoyed laudatory reviews and critical acclaim in influential academic journals, or in major online forums such as H-Africa (www.h-net.org/~africa/), a member of the H-Net's consortium of scholarly lists, which encourages discussion and

debate of Africa's history, culture, and African studies generally and which reaches Africanists of all disciplines in many parts of the world. □

(Part Two of this article will appear in the next issue.)

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