The State of African Publishing

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This bibliography is an indispensable one-stop-shop for the latest facts and issues on the publishing industry and reading trends in Africa. It is the latest effort in the relentless crusade of Hans Zell, in a challenging global context, to analyse and create space and respect for African publishing.

More than 2,500 works are critically annotated, often with abstracts and extensive citations, including almost 500 online resources and 1,612 entirely new entries, organised under topics such as 'African books in the international marketplace', 'Open access publishing', and 'Women in African publishing/ Publishing by and for women'. This wealth of information on book development and the growth of the publishing industry in Africa is worthy of celebration.

The bibliography points to progress and highlights what remains to be done, especially in countries such as Chad, Mauritania and Niger, where there appears to be no literature of any kind on publishing and the book sector. One would love to challenge Hans Zell to start documenting trends and developments in North Africa as well, but, as he states in his preface, '[I]t is not my intention to produce further editions of the bibliography on my own.… It is my hope that an African book development organization, or a library at an academic institution in Africa, will be able to take over the work, and will systematically seek to collect and analyze new material, eventually leading to a revised and fully updated edition of the bibliography sometime in the years ahead' (p. xv).

Entries range from books by government and official publications to reports, surveys, papers in edited collections, periodical articles, book sector studies and similar documents, and theses and dissertations, some of which are now accessible online as full-text documents. While focusing primarily on material published over the past two and a half decades, the current bibliography has retained some earlier literature of historical importance. It thus succeeds in bringing together the most significant and seminal work of interest to students and scholars of past and current thinking on the growth and development of indigenous publishing, and the promotion of books and reading in Africa.

Henry Chakava, veteran Nairobi-based innovative and enterprising publisher, crowns the bibliography with an introduction in which he frankly and candidly assesses the current state of the book industry in Africa. To the question of whether African publishing has come of age since the 1973 Ile-Ife conference on the theme, Chakava responds that although some progress has been made, the general picture is blurry. Growth in the 1970s was followed by decline in the 1980s, then by measured resurgence since the 1990s. While associational life among writers, publishers and book dealers has increased, as has the number of book fairs within countries and across regions, associations and organisations remain weakly structured and poorly managed, and the majority cannot survive without donor support. Notwithstanding the support and initiatives witnessed since the 1990s, Africa is yet to achieve its potential and remains at the bottom of the world book production chart. The problems that plagued publishing in the 1970s and 1980s – lack of capital, training, equipment and raw materials, an underdeveloped market and competition from multinationals – may have diminished but have not entirely disappeared.

This bibliography demonstrates reason for hope, despite factors that conspire against publishing in Africa, such as mediocrity of content and technical quality, language difficulties, invisibility, poor reputations of publishers, and insufficient marketing, distribution and readership. If these problems are universal, they are exacerbated in Africa. In addition to technical and financial difficulties, the publishing industry in Africa faces censorship and repression, limited investment in training, lack of incentives and conducive environments, as well as political bottlenecks. Governments, as Henry Chakava puts it, are more concerned about ensuring that children get books on their desks, regardless of their origin or content or language, than in ensuring development of local publishing industries. In many a country, the climate of repression since independence has meant a dearth of local publishing in general and of quality in particular. The few existing publishers have had to steer clear of controversial material, which, given the sensitivity of government to anything mildly critical, has forced them out of business or reduced them to printers of inoffensive but unprofitable literature.

All these factors contribute to make the African publishing and book industry the underdeveloped underachiever that it is. It contributes a meagre three per cent to the total world publication output and is heavily dependent on school textbook publishing and donor-driven book procurement programmes. Well over 90 per cent of books published in Africa are school textbooks, and the majority of these are published by multinational companies. In South Africa for example, 60 per cent of educational publishing (i.e. 80 per cent of the entire publishing industry) is controlled by multinationals, and the remaining 40 per cent almost exclusively by local white-owned companies. Publishing of books of interest and relevance to the majority of Africans is rare. Multinational publishers target the elite few who can read and write European languages and – 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. Most sub-Saharan African publishers north of the South African Limpopo River might have the will to promote alternative work, but they simply do not have the means to do so – nor can they survive doing so.

Created in the late 1980s and early 1990s to strengthen African writing, publishing and book distribution networks such as the African Writers Association (PAWA), African Publishers Network (APNET), African Booksellers Association (PABA), and African Books Collective (ABC) have certainly increased awareness and accessibility. The challenge remains, however, of ensuring the visibility and recognition of African publications as the Writers suffer administrative censorship or high rejection rates at the hands of commercial multinational publishers.

However, African publishers, through sheer resilience and commitment, have brought to the limelight books that otherwise would never have made it into print, though the quality of printing and binding leaves a lot to be desired. As Henry Chakava highlights in his introduction to this bibliography, many African writers of fiction and faction, from novelists to academics through poets, playwrights and journalists, seek visibility through publication yet perish, and not necessarily because of poor content. They perish because publishers simply do not have the capacity to guarantee quality and disseminate their publications. Things are particularly difficult for those writing and trying to publish in indigenous African languages.

In the social sciences, where objectivity is often distorted by obvious or subtle ideology, African scholars face a critical choice between sacrificing relevance for recognition or recognition for relevance. The politics of the cultural economy of publishing prevents them from achieving both recognition and relevance simultaneously. Yet, Africa is suffering from famine – a famine of books grounded in and relevant to the cultures of Africa. Starved of their own culture, people have difficulty garnering confidence and strength.

Even the most non-commercial, 'progressive' or 'independent' publishers and university presses hesitate to promote diversity of content because they run the risk of putting themselves out of business by venturing away from the standardised, routinised and predictable menus the readership has been socialised to expect. Publishers uncritically recruit reviewers – who are arbitrators of taste, standards and knowledge – regardless of ideological leanings or cultural backgrounds. This implies that publishing is about policing ideas to ensure plurality without diversity in national, regional and global book markets. The future of African publishing must go beyond the market in its fundamentalist sense. Scholarly and other traditions are invented and reinvented. It is the place and duty of scholarly publishers, in and outside Africa, to populate a global marketplace with multiple identities and cultural conviviality, and provide space for unique and powerful voices.

Current investments in knowledge and cultural production by Africans are insufficient to ensure production informed by the lived and dynamic realities of Africans. Outside Africa, knowledge of Africa beyond popular stereotypes is poor. Given that perceptions are shaped and reshaped over time and given the importance of cultural diversity in a fast globalizing world, conscious efforts should be made to develop policies aimed at eradicating 'cultural poverty' in and on Africa. Such policies should encourage the production and consumption – in Africa and the rest of the world – of cultural products created by Africans who are crying out for the space and means to tell the story of African creativity in dignity. This mission is not achievable in a context where the global cultural industries are driven by the desire for profit with few incentives for ensuring representation for the world's cultural diversity. Publishers could contribute to the eradication of cultural poverty through publication and dissemination of African books as cultural products. African publishers have a long way to go to provide for a rainbow continent.

Harnessing e-publishing and print-on-demand technology will make it possible to publish books that would otherwise be too costly to print in large quantities where markets are not assured. Distribution, the weakest link in African publishing, needs creative solutions, through existing networks and other avenues. This comprehensive critical bibliography makes an immeasurable contribution by providing publishers and book dealers with ideas on how to overcome or mitigate distribution challenges. Through comprehensive documentation of the book chain in Africa, Hans Zell draws attention to African book producers, thereby enhancing their visibility.

Note

[1] Access to the online version is bundled with purchase of the print edition at

www.hanszell.co.uk/pbrssa/index.shtml.