Obstacles to book development in Africa /
Les obstacles au développement du livre en Afrique

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2023

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1. Introduction

For good or for ill, the invention of the printing press changed information consumption forever. It accelerated the dissemination of knowledge in many ways and allowed for the possibilities of documenting oral traditions. On the surface it existed to facilitate access to information, but it has always been subject to censorship and control by the authorities. The African continent, which in its history has experienced the rise and fall of independent states with rich cultures, civil wars, colonialism with its cruelty to people and culture, painful liberation and all the traumas of postcolonialism, is still recovering from all these events. The historical context has greatly influenced the emergence and spread of printing and book development in Africa, and the contemporary narrative influences the evolution of this industry on the continent.

It would not be possible in this paper to cover the whole story of book development in all African countries, because the subject is vast and each country deserves its own in-depth scrutinous study. However, it is important to show the key stages and difficulties of book production in the region, and the bibliography suggests further reading to allow one to get acquainted with individual cases and the general framework of the study in more detail.

Thematically, the paper is divided into two large parts: the first explores the historical perspective and finds the roots of many obstacles to book development in the past events, while the second chapter examines the topic from a contemporary perspective and offers an insight into different approaches to solving existing problems.

2. Historical perspective on obstacles to book development in Africa

The idea of the "national", which is young enough by historical standards for the many African states, seems to be gaining a second youth on the African continent in the context of book development. With youth comes not only rapid growth but also many problems arising from a lack of experience, artificial and natural constraints.

Numerous research works indicate that there are two distinct phases in the development of African countries after the introduction of printing press: the "new" postcolonial and the "old" colonial periods. Even if the study is devoted to the current state of affairs in book development, it is rare for a researcher not to make a brief reference to the history. Since most of the problems that affect book development today are deeply rooted in the past. They do not come out of nowhere, but are the result of old issues and challenges.

Many of the obstacles faced by printing in Africa have not been resolved to this day. It seemed important, therefore, to make a small historical journey into the early days of printing and its concerns in order to illuminate in this way the present state of affairs.

2.1. History of book publishing in Africa

Researchers approach the history of book development in Africa differently. Some focus on European heritage, exports, colonies, others pay attention to indigenous publishing initiatives. Below we try to cover the key aspects that are crucial for understanding the historical perspective and the current situation. However, because of the diversity of experiences of backgrounds and practices in particular African regions, our paper often includes singular examples as well as generalized narrative.

Printed books originated in North Africa and spread across the continent through Islam (Njogu and Middleton 103). The first printing press in Egypt appeared in 1821–1822, as one of the steps taken by the then ruler, Mohamed Aly, to modernize the country. The real growth in the number of printing presses occurred in the second half of the 19th century and was associated with the Christian missionaries who flooded Africa. For example, the first printing press in Nigeria appeared in 1846 and the Bible in Yoruba was printed in the 1880s, Ethiopia had a printing press in 1863, Kenya in 1894 (le Roux 255-256).

In Islamic regions, manuscripts and printed books co-existed smoothly until the 1940s (as seen in Zimbabwe), while in Christian parts of Africa, printed books replaced manuscripts. This situation was mainly due to the fact that the Qur'an preferred to be handwritten, while the Christian church encouraged the printing of the Bible for rapid distribution (Bang 96).

It should be noted, however, that not all missionaries were eager to establish presses for printing religious literature. Sub-Saharian Africa was characterized by the printing of books in local languages by Protestants. Missions in this region were quick to adapt local languages to print the Bible while Catholic missions were not at all proactive in this matter (Cagé and Rueda 72). For instance, the example of the Congo Republic shows that by the early 20th century, 84% of all books produced were printed by Protestants rather than Catholics, although the number of missions was almost the same (Yates 314-15). Bible translations were then followed by religious hymns, songs, and catechism translations.

The advent of printing presses accelerated the spread of literacy among indigenous people, and the fact that the first printed books were often Christian and translated into local languages influenced the transcription of these languages into moveable types. For this

purpose, the local alphabet would have been adapted to Latin script (and in rare cases Arabic). Cagé and Rueda have shown convincingly, using econometric data from Sub-Saharan Africa, that proximity to the printing press had a long-term positive effect on people's interest in reading news and participating in political life (Cagé and Rueda 70).

Immediately after the introduction of the printing press, the first notable difficulty in book development arose – the control of book distribution was in the hands of the missionaries and the authorities. A small number of works by African authors in local languages, rather than translations of ecclesiastical texts, began to be printed only in the early 20th century. The example of Clement Martyn Doke, called "the father of African languages in southern Africa" (Altbach 47) and his work on translations across South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia is significant. Another famous advocate of African languages was Sol Plaatje.

The British colonies in southern Africa were dominated by "indirect control" while the Belgian, French and Portuguese colonies maintained assimilationist policies. These different strategies affected not only the sociopolitical environment but also the distribution of books translated into local languages (Altbach 43-44). As always there are exceptions to this general rule: in Madagascar, for example, texts in the local language were being printed as late as the late 18th century. This can be explained by the fact that the local administration had more influence on the island than the French (Larson 589).

From the 1930s, texts related to development areas such as agriculture, home economics, and civics were published, in local and colonial languages. State Literature Bureaus, which are publishing houses owned by state authorities, were established in most Anglophone African countries in the 1940s. They produced general literature, fiction, religious, and training books (Christenses 5).

Printed offices, organized by the local population, began to appear actively on the continent only in the postcolonial period. During this period, local languages had a crucial role in the unification of indigenous people and the formation of national identity. This is well illustrated by the example of Swahili in Tanzania and Kenya, the local languages of Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania (Altbach 15, 70). In Southern Africa, the process of writing in African languages rather than the translation of religious or popular literature in Europe began in the 1930s. This interest coincided with the emergence of the African cultural boom and the formation of African intellectuals. In the 1950s there was a boom in education in many African countries. Government authorities had neither the desire nor the ability to fund book printing but university, missionary, and commercial publishers could meet the demand for

literature in African languages. Not only textbooks were printed but also entertainment literature, poetry, and nonfiction booklets. The 1970s marked a second wave of adaptation and universalization of local languages. Now it was the authorities who did the work on this project, not the Christian missionaries, for example, in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the BLS countries (Altbach 53).

Thus, a historical perspective on the development of printing shows that the problems associated with this industry can be roughly divided into those related to reading and writing, book production and consumption.

2.2. Obstacles to book development in the past

During the early days of book development in Africa, the control of printing by Christian missions and later colonial authorities resulted in two main problems. Firstly, censorship and strict control over the subject matter of books produced, and secondly, the frequent neglect of books in local languages in favor of texts in the language of the colonizers.

The cost of making and maintaining printing presses was very high, and materials for printing were hard to access. With hyperinflation in most African countries, these led to high book prices. As a result, despite the efforts of Christian missions to educate the population, literacy rates remained very low. However, Tanzania stood out, with a 90% literacy rate in the early 1980s but still a low reading rate (Altbach 15).

Moreover, the circle of book readers was narrow and the numbers of libraries and book clubs were limited. Mass production of books simply did not have a market and was not needed. Religious literature and educational textbooks remained the main subjects and the key directions of the development of book printing.

There are several thousand languages in Africa, with more than 1,200 languages spoken only in the southern part of the country alone (Altbach 76). The decision of which language to print books in was a daunting task. This challenge was of concern even during colonization, with supporting local languages being a priority.

The postcolonial policies of some countries to privatize foreign publishers (especially Macmillan and Longman) in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in their withdrawal from the South African market. This predictably led not to a flourishing of publishing but rather to a decline of the whole industry (Altbach 17). In contrast, foreign publishers came to Kenya in the 1970s and despite having great difficulty building into the economy managed to provide books for almost all of the East African region (Chakava 7).

Until the 1990s there was no clear regulation of the author-publisher relationship in many African countries. Far-sighted publishers could buy up the book rights of the few African authors for cheap and capitalize on their ignorance and lack of legal support. The absence of trust and transparency in the publishing business had a negative impact on the general trend of book development.

Additionally, an unstable social and economic environment, military conflicts between states, and civil wars have not been conducive to book publishing in postcolonial Africa. In conclusion, the challenges faced in the early stages of book development, combined with subsequent factors, have contributed to the slow growth of the book industry in postcolonial Africa.

3. The modern world of publishing in Africa and its problems

It is important to reiterate that no single model of publishing can apply to an entire continent, especially one as diverse as Africa. Different regions experienced different methods of colonial rule, worked through their own decolonisation efforts, and every nation's relationship with their former colonizer by necessity will be radically different. At the most simplified level, there are still distinct regions; Arab-Africa, francophone Africa, anglophone Africa, luzophone Africa, and white-ruled southern Africa (Smith 141). For the limited scope of this discussion, we will be focussing primarily on francophone and anglophone North Africa.

3.1. Established publishing industry in the global North

Of the books read in middle Africa, most titles published are either in English or French and published abroad. For example, at the Salon du livre de Paris, while there were African books available the ones actually published in Africa were so vastly outnumbered by the ones published in France that it "represented a literary monopoly" (Small 5).

Even the African intellectual community publishes outside of Africa. This is for a variety of reasons, not limited to the prestige and royalty payments that come with publishing with a major publishing company. It allows the authors to reach a wider market, but in turn it encourages publications that may be *about* Africa but are for the international community and not Africans.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, British companies like Oxford University Press and Macmillan and Company began localizing their books for an African market in the 1970s to keep a hold on the English language market. These days, the benefits of increased localization has resulted in an increase in African management and authorship but that doesn't take away from the ultimate control and profit belonging to the European-based companies (Smith 144).

In addition to needing to compete with the long-established publishers in the North, indigenous publishers have additional difficulties to face. Funding is hard to source due to slow returns on investments, making the business model look unappealing to banks and entrepreneurs (Smith 146). The lack of funding keeps African publishers from being able to compete with multinational companies on an even footing or to "practice the economies available to large companies" (Smith 148). They often find themselves subject to duties and taxes on paper, regulated by imported tastes, and have difficulty finding competent editorial staff. Best selling authors are sure to look elsewhere, and this compounds the problem.

The large commercial printers of the North don't face these same difficulties, having been entrenched in international trade for decades. In comparison, the international trade agreements developed in the early post-war years marginalized 'developing countries' when they established the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT); those countries had very limited bargaining power (Small 4).

Walter Bgoya, general manager of Tanzania Publishing House from 1973-1990 and founder of Mkuki na Nyota Publishers in 1990, has said "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 under funding of libraries" (Bgoya).

We may ask why the impacted state governments don't intervene on behalf of the local printers. In some cases they are bound by the same trade restrictions. In other cases, it has been said some government officials will side on behalf of the large (European) companies for personal benefit. Smith describes the symbiotic relationship between bureaucrats and multinationals as early as 1975 but evidence suggests this remains true in many cases (Smith 148).

3.2. Normalization of European Languages for Literature

It is important to be clear that, while European printers might be localizing their books for African readers, they continue to publish nearly exclusively in European languages, with English and French being the most widely used. It makes it very difficult to complete the decolonization process (if such a thing is possible to be completed) when the dominant language continues to be that of the oppressor. As Seydou Nourou Ndiaye, founder of Editions Papyrus and member of the International Alliance of Independent Publishers, said, "la langue de l'édition n'est pas celle du peuple" (Small 7).

With the English-French reading market so entrenched, even local publishers are more likely to publish in those languages rather than that of the indigenous population. That predominance of European languages in publishing contributes to the idea that they are the true representatives of literature, reinforcing the perception of the global North as the center for intellectual production.

This attitude is further emphasized when it comes to African literature, in which international scholarships and academics commonly split it into two categories; modern and traditional. Modern, referring to texts printed in the language of the colonizers, and traditional covering the massive range of cultural texts in African languages (Small 7). This divide very clearly implies that the literature in African languages doesn't qualify as modern. It instead becomes a relic of the past and exists for historical curiosity. In this way African literature then becomes normalized as not having much in the way of intellectual property for the modern reader, "making Africa a singular space rather than a vastly diverse continent" (Small 6). And non-print literature ends up discounted or outright excluded.

3.3. Print and the Digital World

It seems inescapable now that African societies, not just in the anglophone or francophone North, are increasingly divided by education. The wealthy have access to those expensive private establishments which educate only in European languages, and those people are 'rapidly becoming a ruling class with access to the best jobs and the best economic opportunities' (Bgoya 118). The rest of the population educate themselves as best as they can given the available resources.

In many ways, digital archives run by universities and the widespread creation of online articles and academic papers could be the solution to this problem. However, content in

electronic format doesn't automatically become accessible worldwide - many Africans don't have reliable internet. Unless the approach to internet development considers both socioeconomic and cultural factors, the usage of electronic publications may actually increase the digital divide between Africa and the global North, instead of decreasing it (Adala and Frank-Wilson viii).

The challenges in digital publishing balance between two axes; providing public access to information, for the benefit of education, versus sustainability and affordability. The internet is littered with broken links and university projects that are no longer hosted, and that is from some of the most well-funded institutions in the world. Adala describes the foundational costs as "research and compilation, editorial development costs, database creation and maintenance, web hosting and updating costs, permanent archiving and preservation, provision of searchability and usability" (Adala and Frank-Wilson x). All evidence points to the solution being the usage of taxation, public money, subsidies, or some combination of the previous.

The African Virtual University (AVU), established in 1997, is currently working on finding practical solutions to the problems confronting higher education in Africa. a challenge in an era of economic inequality, globalization, and technical innovation (Adal and Frank-Wilson ix).

4. Conclusion

A book, as a medium of communication and information, has played and continues to play a special role in national and individual development. This statement is found in different variations in many articles and books on the subject.

In this paper we have aimed to show the difficult fate of book development in Africa. How many of the industry's challenges and obstacles are rooted in African history, how they are impacted by the consequences of colonialism, wars, and the dire economic situation of the majority population.

Nowadays, book development and the dissemination of books and literacy have become one of the main topics in the local governments activities, international public organizations work, and private donors initiatives.

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