

H-Net Reviews

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Philip G. Altbach, Damtew Teferra, eds. *Publishing in African Languages: Challenges & Prospects*. Chestnut Hill, Mass: Bellagio Publishing Network, 1999. 163 pp. \$19.95/£11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9646078-5-9.

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'THE WRITER, THE PUBLISHER, AND THEIR LANGUAGES'

Knowledge of the nature of African publishing helps us better to understand the context of African literatures. Language policies and realities in African countries are complex, often controversial, and influence patterns of publishing and writing. This situation is tied to the diverse languages spoken in territories carved under colonialism, but also to national and international power relations as well as economic and educational policies pursued since independence. This useful book explores the trends, problems and opportunities of publishing in the many and varied languages of Africa from the varying perspective of publisher, writer, and state, and raises important themes for H-AfrLitCine members to ponder.

Language is a crucial vector and symbol of identity and social participation. Educationalists generally agree that learning and associated publication in first languages effectively promotes and maintains literacy. Yet the problems facing local or indigenous publishers in Africa are legion. In this book, eight well-qualified scholars and publishers share their knowledge and experience of the literary, historical, educational, social, economic, and political dimensions of publishing in the face of these problems. They present case studies from Tanzania and Kenya (Swahili), Ethiopia, Southern Africa, Francophone West Africa, and Nigeria. Introductory and concluding chapters discuss broader issues of language and publishing. A chapter on India's successes in local language publishing adds a comparative vista.

The practice of African language publishing influ-

ences the nature of African literatures [1], education, and politics. Literary awards such as the Nobel, Commonwealth Literature, and even the Africa-centric Noma prizes rarely go to writers in African languages that are, after all, spoken by the majority of Africans. The fragility of African publishing is an indicator of the state of African economies. In 1981, 'the vast continent of Africa, with ten percent of the world population, produced a meager two percent of the global output of books'.[2] A decade later, Africa's share was one percent, with seventy percent of its book needs imported.[3] On the other hand, whereas world linguistic surveys point to growing language rationalization (consolidation into major languages) and a decline in the number of living languages, African languages continue to reproduce and generate ever-new dialects and lingua francas.[4]

Philip Altbach, a specialist on African publishing, opens the book with an outline of dilemmas faced by publishers in African languages, illustrated with ample comparative examples. He makes a strong case for the continuing viability for these publishers and recounts their major problems: dominance by colonial or 'world' languages (notably English and French) that are still favoured by ruling elites; linguistic complexity; the high cost of special typography for tonal differences in non-standardized scripts; the political difficulties of privileging one language over another; cross-border linguistic tensions; the limited purchasing power and low literacy rates of readers; shortage of basic materials; and limited markets.[5]

In the face of these severe problems and given the failures of experiments in state publishing, Altbach sets the trend for other contributors when he argues (though with scant regard for the omnipotence of the transnational corporation (TNC)) that “the trend toward the privatization of textbook production will strengthen indigenous publishing” (p. 3). The other authors, apparently celebrating the demise of the state publishing house and eagerly awaiting the Millennium of the Market, take up this refrain.

M. M. (Mugyabuso) Mulokozi, Professor at the Institute of Kiswahili Studies, University of Dar es Salaam, provides a detailed, clear and expert analysis of past and present Kiswahili publishing in Tanzania and Kenya. He adds the insights of a creative writer who personally has suffered from the myriad technical and political problems that have bedeviled African publishing, from the heritage of colonial contempt for indigenous writers to the stultifying effects of state domination. This is a most readable and informative chapter. The history and current problems of the industry are succinctly outlined. One reads of difficulties with poor writing skills, copyright, distribution, and state confinement policies. Interesting details are noted, such as that some five thousand Kiswahili poets are active in Kenya and Tanzania, or the cruel exploitation by metropolitan publishers of writers such as Shaaban Robert. Citing the case of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Mulokozi warns that political- and religious-inspired censorship remains a major threat to the flowering of Kiswahili literature in East Africa (p. 35).

Other writers also have dealt with the relationship of Kiswahili and politics, including issues of dependency, decolonization, and popular participation.[6] Jan Blommaert, for example, notes that local publishers after independence began to choose, publish, distribute and promote their own language literature and joined the nation-building project. He argues that in societies ‘where literacy is an unequally distributed resource’ the impact of such books may be greater, and readers may want to find more than just one message in the book. This, in turn, may structure literary practice itself: authors may be aware of the social significance of the act of publishing a book – a product which is almost by definition a rare commodity – and they may adapt their style and content accordingly.

This factor influenced the nature of state-controlled publishing in Tanzania which, despite its weaknesses, ‘did not create a sterile, dogmatic literature’ and gave some ‘space’ to creative artists and intellectuals to give

their own reading of Ujamaa’.[7]

Mulokozi less equivocally attacks the confining and filtering functions of the state-controlled press. He is quietly optimistic and looks to recent political developments in Central Africa as offering future scope for an expansion of Kiswahili publishing. But he is also realistic: the writer remains ‘generally marginalized, despised, and swindled’ whilst publishing remains trapped in a socio-economic milieu that imposes ‘financial, infrastructural, cultural, and political obstacles’ in its path (p. 37). Tanzanian writers and translators have adequate organizations to assist them; what they need is adequate material support and a coherent national book policy.

Damtew Teferra, educated at Addis Ababa and Stirling Universities and Boston College, discusses dilemmas facing publishers in multinational Ethiopia, emphasizing current government policies and the significance of ties between regional education and publishing. He notes the continuing severe problems with multiple languages and scripts, and the haste of implementing vernacularization before sufficient instructional materials or teachers were in place. Economies of scale are possible with major languages such as Oromo but it is more difficult to sustain publishing in languages spoken by smaller numbers of people. Despite policies favouring privatization, state enterprises such as the Educational Materials Production & Distribution Agency (EMPDA) are still dominant. Damtew Teferra, like Mulokozi, calls for a national book policy and greater power to private publishers. Yet he warns of the danger that, if there is full-scale privatization before regions put in place their own printing and publishing institutions there is a risk that ‘the very policy that claims to promote them [might] turn out to annihilate them’ (p. 106).

He makes practical proposals for change: that certain widely spoken regional languages should be used for instruction until such time as other, smaller languages can build an effective infrastructure. Language policy debate should be depoliticized and not only the benefits, but also the costs and effects of vernacularization policies should be made clear. While it may be possible to eventually develop other vernacular languages at the national level, Amharic remains the most effective national lingua franca in his opinion.

Well-known publishers Mamadou Aliou Sow (Editions Gannal, Guinea) and Victor Nwankwo (Fourth Dimension Publishers, Nigeria) present the insider’s perspective. Sow highlights the key trends in West African publishing in African languages. In many African coun-

tries, the state played a pivotal role in the industry. For instance, at independence in 1958, Guinea had no publishers and for many years thereafter publishing was dominated by the state.[8] He argues that the state should now provide favourable business opportunities for private publishers in the textbook market. Recent democratization in West Africa, he adds, should assist development of national languages. He points to success with harmonized alphabets with concomitant software, and suggests that more trans-border co-publishing in African languages (such as Pular across a wide region of West African Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone zones) could break down barriers erected by colonial borders. Authorities should stop regarding national languages as dialects and intellectuals should be more involved in the development of such languages.

In contrast, African language publishing in Nigeria, where ninety percent of titles are in the three main languages of Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, is already dominated by the private sector. Nwankwo details the complex mesh of language and publishing policies and progress made to date. He sees a need for more teachers of African languages and observes that the vagaries of government policy and especially its poor implementation often throw planning for private publishing in African languages into disarray. The state should assist with translation services (the greatest cost faced by the industry) to facilitate investment by publishers in indigenous languages. Moreover, students should have greater choice to be examined in standards of their own languages.

Dumisani Ntshangase surveys African language publishing in Southern Africa, presenting a number of interesting historical facts and drawing attention to major issues. However, at times the argument is poorly presented and lacking in evidence. The chance is lost to inform the reader more about South African language policy in the post-apartheid era or to discuss such interesting issues as the dependence of educational publishers on prescribed curricula or the fate of recent attempts to Africanize publishing houses. One must look elsewhere [9] to gain a deeper understanding of publishing in this region.

Finally, Thomas Clayton puts indigenous publishing into a global context. The requirements of national integration, financial constraints and the practices of elites all favoured use of the 'world' languages of the colonial powers yet today only ten to twenty per cent of Africans are fluent in these languages.

Running through all the contributors is a cautious optimism about the future, an awareness of severe obstacles, and an apparent faith in market forces to shift them.

PANACEAS?

Is neo-liberalism therefore the main solution to problems besetting publishing in African languages? A number of factors suggest not. In some countries, such as Guinea, where textbook publishing has been opened to the private sector, many different obstacles continue to impede book development.[10] Moreover, literacy levels so crucial in the chain of writing-publishing-reading have been undermined by Structural Adjustment Programs that require governments to spend less on education.

The weakest link in African publishing is distribution [11] and the state certainly has failed to effectively develop this sector. However, this is only part of the picture. Low incomes, poorly developed infrastructures of local book shops, libraries, and transport links, and continued domination by expatriate publishers have exacerbated foreign dependency and made the task of publishing in African languages still more difficult. Capital requires profit and a market numerically dominated by an impoverished and relatively minuscule reading public offers little attraction to business (whether speaking indigenous or Western languages). Partial Africanization of foreign subsidiaries (for instance of OUP in Nigeria in 1972) provided a stimulus to indigenous publishers but many African governments continue to contract textbooks out to transnational corporations.

The contributors to the book are alert to this domination and endeavour to chart realistic strategies for African countries. However, they present little evidence on such determining factors as ownership or investment patterns. Mulokozi notes that few books were, at the time of his writing, (June 1998) being published due to ongoing privatization of firms such as Tanzanian Publishing House and whilst this may be a temporary aberration he does not consider the wider effects of such a hiatus. Neither do they treat in any detail the options for joint state-private ventures or the possibilities for reform of state publishing houses to make them more viable and better-managed.[12]

Are indigenous businesses and their priorities entirely blameless for the current state of indigenous publishing? Do all publishers in fact speak the same 'language' as their authors or are they increasingly speaking another language, that of profit? Clearly, the authors