

Re-appraising the Status and Work Condition of the Writer in Post-colonial Africa



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The Emergency of Nigeria Literature

The literary scholar, Robert, Wren, writing about the making of Nigerian literature in his book published in 1991, described the years 1948-1966 as 'Those magical years'. (1) In the late 1940s- during the colonial period – when I was a student at Government College, Umuahia , we could not believe our eyes when Mr A.J. Carpenter whose book we used for our General Science classes, stood in front of us and addressed us in flesh and blood. We had not before then seen the author of any book we studied and had come to assume that you could not be an author and still be alive! We could not imagine that we would one day become locally and internationally acknowledged authors and still be alive and kicking. I thank God for the privilege of being a living witness to the magical transformation.

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The Book Sector

In the early years of book development in Nigeria, some organizations and individuals combined the key components of book development. The Church Missionary Society produced the authors among its clergy and adherents and established the CMS Press to print the books, and CMS Book shop to market them. Some enterprising Nigerian individuals – often school teachers – followed suit. In the East, the inimitable F.C. Ogbalu authored books and set up Varsity Bookshop to market them.

Today, it is generally accepted that the book sector has three distinct components: the Author who writes the book, the publisher who transforms the author's manuscript into a book for public consumption, and the Bookseller who distributes or sells the book to the reading public. National book development depends on the healthy development of each component unit.

Authorship

There has been a steady growth in the number of published authors in Post – Colonial Nigeria, particularly in the number of new poets. At one time I had fears about the future of the Nigeria novel. However, the emergence of new novelists resident abroad, such as Chimamanda Adichie, and Chioma Okereke have erased my fears that the Nigerian novel had become an endangered species.

There are genuine fears about authorship in Nigeria. The first is in the quality of Nigerian authorship. The authors responsible for the magical years referred to above were products of prestigious government colleges or grammar schools which offered quality education and a conducive environment for creative writing. University College Ibadan, took over the baton, with its academic standards, Magazine Club, 'University Herald' and later 'University Voice'. Such conducive environments hardly exist today.

My participation in the 1987 University of Iowa International Writing Programme introduced me to the opportunities built into the school system for the nurture of young American children in creative writing. An American child who has participated in creative writing workshops in high school and as an undergraduate stands head and shoulders above his Nigerian counterpart. Even when out of the school system, he has the opportunity to benefit from writers' villages here and there. Nigeria needs to introduce writing workshops in all secondary schools. Some Nigerian Universities should offer courses in creative writing, following the examples of the University of Jos and Lagos State University in the 1980s.

During the late (poet) Major – General Mamman Vatsa’s tenure as minister of the capital Territory, Abuja, the Federal Government allocated land at Abuja to the Association of Nigeria Authors (ANA) to build a writers’ Village intended to provide a conducive environment for authors working on creative writing projects. General Vatsa’s execution terminated the idea. The idea of establishing positions of writers – in – Residence in the universities has been mooted to help to raise the quality of |Nigerian creative writing. I owe the completion of my novel, *Conspiracy of Silence*, to my one-month residency at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Study & Conference Centre near Milan, Italy.

The late Hon. Justice Akintola Aguda listed other major problems standing in the way of Nigerian authors, including piracy and other forms of copyright infringement, the author’s publishers some of whom declare for royalty payments far fewer than the number of copies they actually sent into the market and in extreme cases constitute themselves into primary pirates of their author’s works. He also mentioned the lending libraries which aid abet the public to use authors’ works without paying for them (2.1)

The Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) has a key to play in improving a lot of Nigerian authors. As of today, the main function of ANA at the national level appears to be to organize an annual convention or get-together of Nigerian authors. ANA should see itself as a responsible trade union to fight for the welfare of authors in their relationships with publishers, booksellers, and the government. It was the dogged fight over several years by the (British) Society of Authors that forced the British Parliament to pass the public lending law which compels the user of a book in a public library to pay a stipulated fee to go to the author of the book.

Publishing

At the time I began work on my first novel, the only avenue for publishing creative writing in Nigeria was through foreign publishers in the United Kingdom. To be accepted for publication was like an elephant going through the eye of a needle. It proved immensely helpful when I was introduced to a literary agent in London who in found me, a reputable publisher. Being published in the United Kingdom immediately propelled you into the international marketplace, with obvious advantages. You were inducted into the best traditions of the British publishing industry, including payment of standard royalties. My historical novel on the Nigeria/Biafra war

Chukwumeka Ike

– *Sunset At Dawn* – received 14 reviews in the United Kingdom on publication.

Post-colonial Nigeria saw the end of foreign publishing for the Nigerian authors resident in Nigeria. The death of Fontana Books, London, in the early 1980s automatically orphaned my first six novels published by them and I was compelled to find Nigerian publishers for them. Foreign publishers which had subsidiaries or branches in Nigeria were compelled by the degree to their established new companies with at least 60% Nigerian ownership or to leave the country. Those of them who remained have been more or less the major operators in the publishing sector, maintaining some of the traditions of their erstwhile principals. However, the foreign market previously enjoyed by the author has more or less disappeared. An Oxford (UK) – based organization known as African books collective has been set up by African publishers acting jointly, to market books published by them in Europe and America. Outside the former subsidiaries or local branches of foreign publishers who have indigenized, many wholly Nigerian publishers of varying sizes have sprung up. Many Nigerians who are unable to find publishers of their choice have opted to publish their works themselves.

A few observations about self-publishing. In Colonial Nigeria, we were advised to avoid self-publishing as you would avoid the plague, and it was referred to as vanity publishing. My interaction with writers from Latin American and Southeast Asian countries at the University of Iowa International Writing Programme in 1987 revealed to me that self-publishing was the order of the day in their countries.

In a chapter on self-publishing in my book **How to Become a Published Writer**, I advanced four justifiable grounds on which a writer could decide to be his own publisher. I pointed out that Daniel Defoe, Zane Grey, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Edward Fitzgerald succeeded as writers because they financed the publication of their manuscripts previously rejected by publishers. I however pointed out some problems of self-publishing and suggested how to overcome them.

Book Selling

My assessment of the book-selling sector in post-colonial Nigeria is not a happy one. You can count the number of international standard bookshops or bookstores in Nigeria today on the fingers of your hand. I mean the kind of bookshop in which a customer could spend hours browsing through exciting blurbs. The Nigerian bookshop has become little more than

a market for prescribed textbooks. I have seen bookstores in the US which organize autograph sessions involving authors whose books they sell.

In addition to good bookshops, Nigeria needs one or more virile book distribution networks, to ensure that all books published in Nigeria, by the established publishers as well as by author/publishers are effectively distributed to all Nigerian towns and villages, thereby maximizing the impact of books nationwide and at the same time maximizing the earning of authors, publishers and booksellers.

To Summarize

On balance, the book has reasonably well in post-colonial Nigeria. Nigeria has produced giants in the international book world. At one time there was a genuine fear that these giants, who were products of the magical years might die without successors. The emergence of young international stars in recent years gives hope for the future. The only snag is that all the greats – old and young – rose to greatness on books published in Europe or America. This poses a challenge to Nigerian authors, publishers and booksellers, to come out with locally published books that will not only serve national needs but will also make a mark in the international marketplace.

References

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