

**From publish or perish to publish and perish:  
What 'Africa's 100 Best Books' tell us about publishing Africa\***

By

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### **Introduction**

The African publishing industry initiative to determine 'Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' was launched in reaction to the fact that 'no African novel ... made the first 100' when a similar exercise was organised in 1998 to determine the '100 Great Books in English published in the USA'. The task was to 'Identify the 100 Best Books from the African continent which made history and charted the way forward for future best books'. To qualify, a book had to be 'written by an African on a subject matter relevant to Africa'; an African understood to mean 'someone who was born in Africa or who became a citizen of an African country' (ZIBFT 2002:v). This initiative is clearly praiseworthy as a first step highlighting writing and reading in Africa. But its organisers did not adequately problematise the important dimensions of the content and the perspectives of the publications from Africa. A subject matter might be 'relevant to Africa', but written in an overbearing, unsympathetic or outright hostile manner, such that its relevance only compounds the predicaments Africans are grappling with. Similarly, a writer or scholar might have been 'born in Africa', or 'became a citizen of an African country', but is culturally out of tune with the bulk of Africans who people his or her books.

In this regard, certain exceptions are noteworthy for their singular commitment to publishing Africa for Africans, even when this has not always enriched them financially. A case in point is the Heinemann's African Writers Series, which published its first African novel – Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* – in 1958, and has remained committed to Africa until discontinued in 2003 because of persistent financial losses occasioned by the fact that only an elite few in Africa read in English (or any other European language), and amongst those who do, few who can afford to buy a book want to read African authors. In some cases, students read African authors only reluctantly as part of an examination, perhaps because neither teachers nor educational institutions are keen to celebrate Africanness beyond rhetoric. To make matters worse, only a minority of those interested in Africa outside Africa read books written by Africans primarily for fellow Africans (Zezeza 1997:44-86). While it lasted, however, the Heinemann African

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Writers Series ‘delighted many people ... in Africa and beyond’ (Achebe 2000:51). To Achebe:

The Launching of Heinemann’s African Writers Series was like the umpire’s signal for which African writers had been waiting on the starting line. In one short generation an immense library of new writing had sprung into being from all over the continent and, for the first time in history, Africa’s future generations of readers and writers – youngsters in schools and colleges – began to read not only *David Copperfield* and other English classics that I and my generation had read but also works by their own writers about their own people. (Achebe 2000:51).

Finally, that no African novel made the ‘100 Great Books’ of the USA does not necessarily mean that Africa is not a key theme with American readers. It could simply mean that Americans are reading on Africa, reading about Africa, but hardly reading (from) Africans. In this regard, it is highly significant that Heinemann has failed to buy into Western markets in a major way with its African literary menu, and that it has been forced to fold in order to stem its losses. Even more significant is the fact that the Heinemann African Writers Series was not taken over by one diasporic interest or another committed to Africa. Actually folding, despite its lofty ideals and achievements, speaks much of the lack of commitment to African publishing even by the high achievers among the African elite and diaspora in the USA and UK.

Against this background I argue that it is not enough to publish or read about Africa, just as it is not enough to pass for an African writer or scholar. We must problematise what is published and read on Africa, and how sympathetic to Africa culturally, morally and scientifically our authors and publications are. It is hardly enough to simply assume Africanness from the fact that a publication is produced by someone whose cosmetic indicators would enable them to pass for African. Equally myopic is the assumption that because a writer passes for ‘non-African’, he or she cannot competently and positively articulate African causes in ways relevant to ordinary Africans. Countless are the situations where Africans have been betrayed by so-called fellow Africans only to be redeemed by concerned non-Africans. The challenge is how to promote commitment to African humanity and creativity without producing a simplistic reductionism or the inflation of belonging in Africa. This paper pursues these considerations, by focusing on how ‘Africans’ and ‘non-Africans’ alike have tended to represent Africa in publications. For, as Chinua Achebe argues, writing and scholarship on Africa or anywhere else, ought to be underpinned by ‘a shared humanity linking the author to the world of his creation; a sense that even in the most tempting moments of grave disappointment with this world, the author remains painfully aware that he is of the same flesh and blood’ (Achebe 2000:49).

Academics are all too familiar with the maxim: publish or perish. But some have published only to perish. Just like politicians who know that giving one’s best interview to an obscure, low circulation, small town newspaper could cost one an election, academics are increasingly aware that it is not enough simply to publish. Various hierarchies, both scholarly and otherwise, are there to ensure that only a few shall be recognised from the many that are published. Various factors - mediocrity of content,

invisibility, remoteness or the poor reputation of publisher, together with poor marketing and distribution - conspire to ensure that academics and writers perish even when they have published. The technical and financial difficulties facing the publishing industry in Africa are well known. Also common knowledge is the challenges facing African writers of fiction and fact, from novelists to academics through poets, playwrights and journalists. Charles Larson, for example, has done an excellent job documenting 'the ordeals of the African Writer', using archival sources, interviews, portraits and testimonies (Larson 2001). Many African scholars seeking to fulfil the academic requirement of publishing cannot but perish. They face a critical choice between sacrificing relevance for recognition or recognition for relevance. The political economy of the publishing industry prevents them from achieving both of these values at the same time.

Equally important in determining what and how Africa is read are the cultural dimensions of publishing on Africa, of publishing African writers and scholars, and of publishing African writing and scholarship. The historically pervasive denigration of the African in Western literary and academic production has created a dual hurdle to the efforts of Africans seeking to publish with recognised Western publishers of fiction and scholarship. First, it predisposes publishers to hold Africans to Western intellectual and literary standards, seen as the hallmark of intellectualism and cultural production. Adhering to such standards in order not to perish as a writer or scholar often entails cultivating insensitivity to issues, perspectives and approaches of relevance to Africans, their realities, values and priorities. Also, he who pays the piper calls the tune. The fact that Westerners are generally better endowed financially, and are the leading consumers of published material, also entails that the hierarchies of humanity and cultures they have internalised since imperial and colonial times poses as the palatability test for what is published, bought or read. They have been socialized into seeing African phenomena as problems to be solved primarily through Westerners or Western-inspired interventions.

Being published or being read thus becomes much less a function of how relevant to understanding the African situation is a writer, scholar or writing, than a function of how well it suits the purposes of conforming to Western norms and expectations. Publishers modelled along these lines are seldom tolerant of challenge, stimulation, provocation and competing perspectives at any level. They protect their cultural, intellectual and literary spots jealously, and are ready to deflate all 'saboteurs' and 'subversives'. They do not want their routines unsettled, and would only select for publication those who confirm their basic assumptions on scholarship, literature and the African condition. For the African scholars and writers who give themselves the responsibility to challenge such assumptions based on vested interests and hidden agendas, the task is by no means easy, especially since they rely on these very agents of cultural devaluation of Africa to fund and disseminate their research and creativity. As an African, Ali Mazrui has written on how the phrase: 'the last of the great Jewish prophets', was deleted from his television series *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* by the American Public Broadcasting System, 'afraid of offending Jewish viewers' (Mazrui 1990:90). Lest this is taken as an isolated incident, Mazrui writes:

Every day of the week something is being censored in the American media. Programmes are denied funding for fear of offending advertisers, subscribers,

mainstream patriots, mainstream religious zealots, powerful Jews, powerful gentiles. Otherwise reputable publishers turn down manuscripts, edit out ideas, or surgically remove chapters likely to offend powerful groups in the nation. Censorship in the United States is basically privatized – as befits a private enterprise system. The state leaves censorship to the market place, to the forces of supply and demand. Freelance censors abound (Mazrui 1990:91).

The USA is not alone in censoring diversity in the interest of profit, power and privilege. The rest of the worlds of business, politics and culture are there with the palatability experts of the USA to ensure that the pipers shall play the tunes they call, paid or not (Mazrui 1990:83-101). The increasing privatisation of knowledge production and dissemination makes access to and potential uses of research and scholarship ever more restricted and undemocratic (Brenneis 2004:584). As Susan George has argued, it matters little how many ‘mistakes’ mainstream researchers, theorists or writers make or how insensitive to the predicaments of ordinary people they are, for ‘protected and nurtured by those whose political objectives they support, package and condone, they have a licence to go on making them, whatever the consequences.’ Publishers are able to perpetuate their ideologies by ensuring that only people with the ‘correct’ ideas are published. They know only too well that in order to penetrate people’s heads and acquire their hearts, hands and destinies, they have to make their ideas part of the daily life of people and society, by packaging, conveying and propagating these ideas through books, magazines, journals, conferences, symposia, professional associations, student organisations, university chairs, mass media and various other means (George 1992:109&168-171,1997).

### **Publishing Africa into the Heart of Darkness – the Politics of Publishing**

To publish Africa without making visible the dignity, creativity and humanity of Africans is to publish Africa ‘deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness’, where everything is ‘very quiet’ and where visiting ‘humans’ feel like ‘wanderers on a prehistoric earth’ on ‘an unknown planet’, or like ‘the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance’ requiring ‘profound anguish and ... excessive toil’ to subdue or domesticate (cf. Conrad [1899] 1995:90). To write, publish or read Africa as a void or negation, is to write, publish or read Africa out of existence even for those to whom Africa is everything but void or negation.

Culturally and in terms of scholarship, not every author or work on Africa is visible, not all that is invisible is irrelevant, and not all that is visible is relevant (cf. Copans 1993). African and Africa-based scholars have mostly perished even when they have published, partly because of the standard economics and politics of publishing, but also and perhaps more importantly because they are victims of age-old assumptions and stereotypes about the inherent inferiority of African humanity, creativity and cultures. Literature, especially as produced in the West, is heavily pregnant with writers who have socialised science, culture and people to doubt and resist African humanity. Seen and treated as ‘a curious museum-piece or an esoteric barbaric show for the amusement of tittering ladies and gentlemen desiring glimpses of savagery’ (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1997:621), Africans and their cultures have since contact with Europe been made to forfeit their chance of positively shaping local and global representations and discourses.

By neglecting, distorting and suppressing African cultures, the forces of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid were able to represent these cultures as a hindrance to progress, and encourage individual Africans to pull themselves away from such constrictive customs and retrogressive mentalities.

Sometimes heralded by men of God purportedly harkening to ‘The Call of the Dark Continent’, Africans have for centuries been painted as beneath humanity and morality. To Reverend Deanville Walker of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society for example, writing as recently as 1911, Africans have, ‘Through long generations... known nothing of chastity, and animal passions have dominated their lives from their earliest years’. Immorality ‘is the national sport of the Bantu’, who are also characterised by ‘untruthfulness, ... ingrained dishonesty, ... drunkenness, and the other vices more or less common to Negro and Bantu’. A particularly ‘great... battle has to be fought’, converting Africans who have ‘known nothing of moral discipline’ from childhood, ‘to begin a new life of self-control’ as Christians (Walker 1911:219-21). The pre-Christian African is also seen as a ‘simple, unsophisticated pagan [who] is a believer in magic and witchcraft; [and whose] ... imagination peoples the unseen world with malevolent powers and spirits whose malign influences can only be kept in check by sorcery, incantations, and trickery’ (Walker 1911:313).

Those who have studied imperial Britain and its African colonies tell us how such images of the Dark Continent and its savage barbarians were constantly drawn upon to whip backsliding working class Britons, women and the Irish to submit themselves to the whims and caprice of the high culture and enlightenment drive of the middle and upper classes (Mbembe 2000a: 10-21; J. and J. Comaroff 1997: 236-322) Schipper 1990; Magubane 2004). Chinua Achebe, in *Home and Exile*, is most critical of this early literature for churning out ‘a body of fantasy and myth about Africa’ that eventually ‘developed into a tradition with a vast storehouse of lurid images to which writers went again and again through the centuries to draw “material” for their books’ (Achebe 2000:26-27).

A superb illustration of literature inspired by evolutionary racial theories in the form of a novel is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, first published in 1899. This seminal work, has inspired writers right into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including Nobel Prize winning novelists such as V.S. Naipaul, whose *A Bend in the River* offers compelling reasons why Africans are condemned to be ‘nothing’ unless they ‘trample’ and ‘crush’ the past -- which ‘doesn’t exist in real life’ but in the ‘mind alone’ (Naipaul 1979:120), by breaking ‘free from primitive ties to a doomed continent’ with little more than ‘bush’ to offer civilisation (Achebe 2000:89-90). It is Joseph Conrad’s reluctance to credit Africans with any humanity that seems to have appealed the most to writers seeking to justify the inequalities, contradictions and inhumanities of their own societies. Whatever you do, however animalistic or immoral you get you can’t fall lower than the abysmal creatures who inhabit the Dark Continent. Not even Hitler and his excesses are thought to have surpassed the gruesome capacities of the Heart of Darkness to surprise the world with repulsive novelties: *semper aliquid novi ex Africa*. And Conrad was at his cynical best when he denied Africans humanity: ‘Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman’ (Conrad [1899]1995:91). Lest you counter with: ‘But this was just a work of fiction, and in any case, Conrad was highly critical of Western imperialism!’ - be reminded that intended meanings do not foreclose unintended

outcomes, as to some Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ... reproduces the imperialism which it overtly condemns' (Lyon 1995: xxxvii).

As Achebe notes, such 'sustained denigration' for hundreds of years was 'to make our colonization possible and excusable' (Achebe 2000:33). For over four hundred years, 'hundreds and hundreds of books were churned out in Britain, Europe and elsewhere to create the tradition of an Africa inhabited by barely recognizable humanity'. This tradition enshrined a way of writing about Africa that is replete with prejudice, caricature, negation and cynicism, and that has imposed on Africans 'a badly damaged sense of self' (Achebe 2000:47-81), with whom writing and reading on Europe and North America or out of Africa have become the ultimate indicator of civilisation, a sign of self-cleansing, achievement, legitimation and a foothold in civilisation. To Schipper, in the denigration of Africa and Africans, 'Theory and practice went hand in hand: if blacks were not real human beings, then there was nothing against slavery and the European could do unto savages as he had been created to do, i.e. rule over nature. The nineteenth-century racial theories were undeniably linked to the interests of the group that benefited from them.' And refuting a theory academically 'does not necessarily mean the prejudice automatically disappears' (Schipper 1990:17).

Others, as noted, followed Conrad, and although the West has gained in sensitivity to the reality of Africans 'not being inhuman' and to being merely 'un- or underdeveloped', prejudices and stereotypes can be as difficult to change as a leopard's spots, especially when internalised right from the trusting years of childhood innocence when stories of the heart of darkness served to discipline and punish. Writing as a European, Schipper notes that images of Africans as inferior others are still very much around in the West, with novels drawing on such stereotypes as 'the oversexed black man who is after "our" women' (Schipper 1990:17).

If Africans are less than human, or just about human, how can their claims to creativity or scholarship be taken seriously? I remember reading, in total disbelief, as an undergraduate, a scholarly paper in which Jean-François Medard, a Bordeaux-based French political scientist, claimed that in France universities were forced to lower standards in order to accommodate students from Africa. Claiming that one of the reasons for such magnanimity was the fear by French universities of being accused of racism, Medard wrote:

Les vieilles générations [d'Africains] formées en France n'étaient pas toujours d'une haute qualification: trop souvent, les étudiants avaient obtenu dans nos universités, des diplômes au rabais, sous prétexte que l'Afrique manquait de cadres, en réalité pour ne pas encourir l'accusation de racisme [The older generations trained in France were not always of a high qualification: too often, the students obtained from our universities, devalued diplomas, under the pretext that Africa lacked managers, in reality not to be accused of racism.](Medard 1978:63).

What struck me about the paper was not so much this apparently racist reaction to fear of accusations of racism, but the fact that Medard seemed so oblivious of the relationship between tropicalised degrees by French universities and the subsequent mediocrity and incompetence he is so critical of in the postcolony inherited by the

France-trained graduates. Also not discussed were the benefits of such mediocrity to French academics, especially those of them in African Studies. Most proceeded to set up patrimonial networks, co-opting their eternally grateful African mediocrities to serve as obliging facilitators, field assistants, and data collectors for their 'intellectually sophisticated and theoretically grounded' French counterparts as gatekeepers of knowledge production and dissemination in the French language and the francophone world. Those who excel in civility shall be endorsed and assured a place in the limelight of myopia through invitations to represent 'the African voice/perspective' at conferences, and in book chapters and journals, and through awards tailored to target francophone African scholars exclusively.

Paradoxically, such condescension and callous dismissal of Africa is not only by Europeans and others. It emanates also from Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. As recently as 2004, I met an African-American University of Chicago student on fieldwork, who recounted the difficult time he had convincing the head of one of the most renowned African-American colleges to let him change to an 'inferior' college where African Studies was offered. The head of the college, an African-American woman, thought him weird. She invited him to her office, sat him down, and asked if he had psychological or disciplinary problems, as she could hardly reconcile why a brilliant student like him should want to study Africa: 'Africa? What business do you have studying Africa? Who needs that?' Other Africans who have since graduated to Europe and North America talk of the continent in very derogatory terms, often outdoing Europeans in their caricatures of the predicaments confronting those they have left behind. Some Africans, contemptuous of the continent and of fellow Africans, are so afraid to be perceived to 'fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality', that they are ready 'to lighten their darkness' at all costs, physically, socially and culturally (Fanon 1969:169). The creative arsenal unleashed by the hierarchies of humanity and cultures that fascinate them, has turned such Africans into consumer zombies who crave for everything Western, from the classics to popular fiction, through magazines, films, TV programmes and music, while actively indifferent to the best of African creativity, from the African Writers Series to African cinema through African music and journalism. Few are comfortable reading any book that is not published in the West, regardless of content.

The dominant literature and scholarship have mostly invited African readers to cherish foreign ways by lightening their associations with their hearts of darkness. While currently such invitations to lynch the primitive past have found additional expression in global consumer media and images of desire, in the past it was mostly education in schools and churches that heralded them. Schooling and churching were generally painful and often detested by Africans who failed to grasp what mortal sins their cultures had committed to deserve banishment (Achebe 2001:1-35). Unequal relations of power meant that Africans were forced to comply even when they protested. For, as Okot p'Bitek argues, the ways of one's ancestors may be good and solid with roots that reach deep into the soil, their customs neither hollow, nor thin, nor easily breakable or blown away by the winds; but this does not deter advocates of an assumed universal civilisation from inviting one to despise these ancestral customs and world view, in favour of foreign customs one may not even understand or admire (p'Bitek 1989:19).

For the many of us who have fallen prey to such invitations, the consequences have been predictable. Again, Okot p'Bitek captures the cultural consequences eloquently

through the protagonist in his *Song of Lawino*, who laments the fate of young men who have lost their manhood in classrooms where ‘their testicles were smashed with large books!’ Even her husband, rendered blind by the libraries of white men, has lost his dignity and authority by behaving ‘like a dog of the white man’, lying by the door to ‘keep guard while waiting for left-overs’ from the master’s table. Her husband has lost his ‘fire’ and bull-like prowess, and has succumbed to living on borrowed food, wearing borrowed clothes, and using his ideas, actions and behaviour ‘to please somebody else’. He may have read extensively and deeply and can challenge the white men in his knowledge of their books and their ancestors of the intellect, but to Lawino, this has come at a great price: ‘...the reading has killed my man, in the ways of his people. He has become a stump. He abuses all things Acoli, he says the ways of black people are black’ (p’Bitek 1989: 91-96; cf. Mbembe 2000b).

Thus socialised into glorifying whiteness and the universality of the civilisation it claims, wittingly or unwittingly African creative writers have often bent over backwards to prove themselves to whites even as they write from Africa and about Africans. When we write, it is not to please our fellow primitives; it is to demonstrate to the authors of the universal civilisation that we too qualify to be counted. We virtually mimic them in all we do, and compel everyone else around us to do the same. We distance ourselves from those who take exception to such a craving for induced universalism or those who fall short of excellence in this regard. When Amos Tutuola’s *Palm-Wine Drinkard* was published in 1952, some of us were so unsettled by its defective English, its magical and superstitious extravaganza that, in the name of civilisation, we did everything to distance ourselves from the author and his baby. Some of us even condemned a book we hadn’t read, claiming that the author’s modest academic, educational and intellectual credentials did not qualify him to be creative about Africa (Achebe 2000:70; Larson 2001:1-7). We feared association with Amos Tutuola, concerned that critics who had labeled his work as the ‘truly primitive’, ‘naïve and barbaric’ ‘glimpse of the very beginning of literature’, might, in their generosity of condemnation, consider the author and his book to be ‘typically African’ (Larson 2001:3-5). Our ‘badly damaged sense of self’, meant that we had to prove the contrary to critics like Mrs Huxley, who had already described the book as ‘the grotesque imagery of the African mind’ (Achebe 2000:68-81). We did not want to pass for superstitious ‘Palm-Wine Drinkards’, nor did we want to be branded as those who think more with their hearts than their minds. Thus, few of us had a kind word to say about the book and its author, and the tendency has been to treat as suspect all praises. Little wonder that even those of us based in Nigeria hardly featured when Amos Tutuola died on 7 June 1997 and was graced with a ‘poorly attended and badly organized’ funeral (Larson 2000:1-25).

The fact that most of us still hesitate to follow Tutuola’s example by writing ‘in English but not an English of this world’, or by turning the English language ‘upside-down’, and by addressing themes that reflect the popular realities of African communities (Larson 2001:4-11) demonstrates just how committed to trampling and crushing the past we all are. As Achebe notes, some of us must actively discourage or ‘minimize’ our ‘Africanness’ so that our ‘books can pass in British bookstores!’ (Achebe 2000: 70-81). Such universality, we believe, comes from a mastery of the language of the masters, and as well, from mimicking the master’s idea of a good story well told. The English in our novels must match the Queen’s or Shakespeare’s, and migrating to live in the heart of

English enlightenment helps us to escape the trappings of the ‘palm-wine tapsters and drinkards’ of the Heart of Darkness.

There are many ways of measuring just how successful one is getting on with the business of privileging English storytelling traditions while sounding the death-knell over African creativity in storytelling. As we gather from Buchi Emecheta, there is a world of difference between those of us recognised for our fidelity and dedication to standard prescriptions of creative writing in English, and who have even migrated from the superstitious and magical land of ‘palm-wine tapsters and drinkards’. To those still trapped in the Heart of Darkness, their Africanness – ‘an accursed inheritance’ (Conrad [1899]1995:90) - only guarantees invisibility, even as published writers:

Writing coming from Nigeria, from Africa (I know this because my son does the criticism) sounds quite stilted. After reading the first page you tell yourself you are plodding. But when you are reading the same thing written by an English person or somebody who lives here you find you are enjoying it because the language is so academic, so perfect. Even if you remove the cover you can always say who is an African writer. But with some of my books you can’t tell that easily any more because, I think, using the language every day and staying in the culture my Africanness is, in a way, being diluted. My paperback publisher, Collins, has now stopped putting my books in the African section. (Buchi Emecheta, interviewed by Adeola James, cited in Achebe 2000:71).

Thus, far from what common sense might suggest, stereotypical and hegemonic perceptions of African humanity and creativity have not altogether disappeared with the end of empires. Rather, they have merely disguised themselves, assuming new and subtle forms (Schipper 1990:17-18). Another good example in this regard is the celebrated V.S. Naipaul, to whom anyone from the primitive zones of the globe (India, Africa and Trinidad – his place of birth - included) who hesitates to embrace the universal civilisation is condemned to nothingness in a world that has no place for ‘men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing’ (Naipaul 1979:1). In *A Bend in the River*, he invites these African and diasporic Indian primitives to ‘trample on the past ... crush it’, in the interest of ‘the universal civilisation’ of the West, or for ever be dwarfed by their nothingness (Naipaul 1979:120). The ‘past can only cause pain’; even though it ‘gave us energy’ as ‘our community and our civilization’, it has ‘in every other way left us at the mercy of others’ (Naipaul 1979:148). In a paradoxical context of global flows and closures, it must be quite frustrating for Naipaul and his trampling and crushing disciples, that those who consider themselves more ‘native’ to ‘the universal civilisation’, demand a lion’s share of citizenship and entitlements, offering migrants second-class citizenship at best - as Buchi Emecheta realised upon migration from Lagos to London (see *Second-Class Citizen*, 1974). Such frustrations Naipaul captures in *Half a Life* (2001), and pushed to rediscover the primitivity he so desperately wants trampled and crushed, should it surprise anyone if he were to be rather fundamental in claiming his rediscovered Hindu community and civilisation?

As Schipper aptly observes, given its position of power, the West commands enormous influence over ‘world literature’:

Western literature sets the norm and literature from other cultures runs the risk of being viewed as deviant from the norm. Since publishing firms are largely in the West, authors who want their manuscripts published often have to adjust to the prevailing norm. In view of global inequality and the Western dominance in the circuit of International literary criticism, Western values and literature are increasingly favored above those of other cultures. Thus in the end, it would seem as if *only one value system exists*. (Schipper 1990:26).

Socialised into these hierarchies and frozen views from childhood, publishers, editors, peer-reviewers and cultural producers operate in cultural contexts where it is normal to minimise the scientific and creative capabilities of the African mind, even if increasingly, for reasons of political correctness, this is true in practice even when it remains unstated. It is hardly surprising that African artistic and scientific creativity continue to face an uphill task convincing publishers about the maturity and validity of their creative endeavours.

Faced with repeated rejection (Zezeza 1997:44-69), some Africans have withdrawn completely in total disillusionment, and have gone about desperately seeking an essential, authentic and disconnected Africa through variants of Afrocentricity. Others have invested actively in mastering the Western cultural classics and founders of Western intellectual traditions, all with the intention of competing with and beating Western scholars and cultural producers at their own game. Western publishers, scholars and cultural producers in turn point to the latter as evidence that at the end of the day, the Heart of Darkness, with the right investments in enlightenment, the right probing, single-minded dedication and all, is just as capable as the West, of 'science' or 'culture' and 'intellect'. The mastery of Western classics by Africans is hailed, and repeatedly drawn upon as evidence, even if such mastery has come at the cost of the Africans in question trampling, crushing, and purging themselves of memories and knowledge of their own ancestors, their own communities, their own originality as creative beings. Even then, such successes are seldom used to valorise Africa; rather they serve to emphasize the exceptionality of the individuals in question, and consequently, provide added reason for nativisation or ethnicisation of any creativity or perspective by Africans that seems to deviate from established Western norms and traditions (cf. Mbembe 2000b). Almost invariably, such 'exceptionally talented' sons and daughters of the Heart of Darkness are instantly fished out and celebrated by Western seats of wisdom located at the metropolis, whence they can safely contemplate, theorise and speak on behalf of Africa without risk of backsliding into the savagery that comes with ignoring the call for enlightenment. It is therefore not surprising that even in scholarship recognition for Africans has often meant sacrificing relevance to the communities and cultures we seem so determined to outgrow.

### **Enlightenment without Relevance**

In scholarship as well, Africans are not expected to display any originality of perspective but simply to endorse and apply theories and methodologies and indeed a sense of what is researchable as defined in the West. Most scholarship on Africa is not of Africa, just as most active and well-reputed publishers of Africa are located outside of the continent (Zezeza 1997:44-86). It is estimated that Africa consumes around 12% of the

books produced globally, but is responsible for barely 2 % of the global total (Gray 2004: 4). For most publishers today (university presses included), the profit motive is an overriding factor in deciding what shall or shall not be published, and by extension, what scholarship and scholars shall last or perish. Cultural and knowledge production are increasingly hostage to publishers for whom marketability seems the sole indicator of quality, and profit margins the only value (Brenneis 2004:584-585). If publishers are busy swallowing up one another through mergers and mega-mergers, this is less in pursuit of quality in cultural and knowledge production, than it is a bid to minimise risk and maximise profit through pluralism without diversity. Of course, the rhetoric is everything but simple, as even the most profit-driven of publishers would seldom admit to sacrificing scholarship or cultural diversity on the altar of greed. With the increasing focus on consumption as the ultimate unifier, a supreme indicator of cultural sophistication and symbol of civilisation (Soyinka 1994a: 209-10), individual readers are seen and treated not only as autonomous agents, but also as simple minded consumers whom the publisher has the duty to protect from the ivory tower syndromes of academia. If publishers are interested in the cultural freedom, intellectual development and enrichment of readers, this must be such that guarantees profitability at minimum cost and that can appeal to a global readership. Nothing does this better than the streamlined, routinised, idea of Western culture that has been sold round the globe, caricaturing and debasing the creativity of others in the process.

Thanks largely to a life long history of cultural alienation for the African elites, thanks to the ubiquity of Western educational institutions and epistemological traditions, and thanks to the aggressive exportation of Western cultural products through the mass media, Africans have tended to know more about the West than about themselves and their own environment. Buying into the large-scale consumption of Western cultural products has only strengthened the belief that Western cultures and values must be universal, since even ‘savages’ from the most remote recesses of the heart of darkness appear to share them. Little wonder that ordinary Westerners can’t always understand what fuss academics and activists of peripheral Africa tend to make about globalisation as a process of one-way flows that must be resisted. Just how can the average Westerner understand arguments to the effect that the global culture some presume to observe today is nothing but ‘the transnationalization of a very national voice, the universal triumph of a supremely local and parochial set of images and values’ (Golding and Harris 1997:9), when it is possible to find libraries suffocating with Western classics and latest sensations (from Shakespeare to Harry Potter, through Conrad and others) but lacking in basics on Africa, including books in the African Writers Series, which literary experts are proud to say they can’t teach. It is largely thanks to the exclusion or marginalisation of the African genesis of civilisation (Bernal 1995), and of African cultures and perspectives, that such unmitigated one-way cultural flows are perpetuated (Zeleza 1997:70-86).

Among academics the story is similar. Keen to cover mileage on the unilinear path to the universal civilisation into which they have bought, African educational systems have excelled at the sort of mimicry Okot p’Bitek decries in *Song of Lawino*. If ancestors are supposed to lay the path for posterity, inviting Africans to forget their ancestors has been an invitation for them to be born again and socialised afresh, in the image of the West, using Western-type academic institutions and rituals of ancestral worship. In general, the extraverted nature of African scholarship has favoured the Western

knowledge industry tremendously (Teferra and Altbach 2003; Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004; Odhiambo 2004). It has allowed Western intellectual traditions and practitioners to write themselves into the past, present and future of Africa as civilisers, saviours, initiators, mentors, arbiters (Chinweizu 1987; Mudimbe 1988; Schipper 1990; Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986; Crossman and Devisch 1999; Mbembe 2000a: 7-40; Magubane 2004). Europe and North America have for decades dominated the rest of the world with its academic traditions and products. In the social sciences, the West has been consistently more 'advanced' and 'expansionist' than the 'underdeveloped' and 'dependent' regions of the world. In the late 1980s, American social science, in its 'unrelenting one-way traffic', was able to penetrate regions and countries with cultures as different from its own as those of Africa, France, Canada, India, Japan and the Republic of Korea (Gareau 1987: 599).

This penetration has given American social science a 'privileged position' with 'a very favourable export balance of communications' or 'talking without listening'. Not only is there little importation, American social scientists ensure that 'incoming messages are in accord with American socio-cultural norms'. This, Gareau observed, 'betrays an ethnocentric, inward-looking fixation', with little preference for anything foreign: 'if foreign, a preference for the Anglo-Saxon world; little concern for Continental Europe, and indifference or hostility towards the Second and the Third Worlds' (Gareau 1987: 598-9). In this connection, perspectives sympathetic with the predicaments of Africa have suffered a high rejection rate by university curricula, reviewers for publishers, and academic peers who stick to their conceptual and methodological spots however compelling arguments to the contrary have been. Rejected African scholarship seeking alternative publishers has often perished in the process, for various reasons, including poor finances and inarticulate marketing and distribution strategies. In certain cases, winning awards has failed to improve sales or attract endorsement by mainstream scholarship or readers. If cited at all, it has been as examples of how not to do scholarship (Zeleza 1997:44-86).

Increasing commodification and commercialisation of culture and scholarship blur the traditional distinction between university presses and commercial publishers, and pass for culture and scholarship even the blatantly greedy and aggressive pursuit of profit with mediocrity and the right publicity. The rise in multinational publishers emphasising the unregulated flow and transnationalisation of streamlined, standardised and routinised publications, has tended to weaken the competitiveness of publishers with specific national, regional or associational scholarly and cultural missions. This implies, their rhetoric of benevolence and munificence notwithstanding, that the dominantly Anglo-Saxon global publishing corporations are more about closures than free flows among the world's cultures and scholarly traditions. They promote a largely one-way flow in cultural and knowledge products that favours a privileged minority as it compounds the impoverishment of the majority through closures and containment. In this way, they are able to control not only global markets, but also global consciousness, simply by denying access to creativity perceived to stand in the way of profit, power and privilege. And if they decide to invest mostly in tastes informed by a very narrow understanding of humanity, culture and scholarship, then plurality and diversity suffer, as the likelihood of cultural imperialism, trivialisation and misrepresentation increases.

Understood in terms of the centre-periphery perspective, the favourable 'export balance' for American social science is explained by the spread of American political, economic and cultural values after World War II. Following the war, America, as a

superpower, exported its cultural values, through educational aid and the social sciences. “In this way, the US exported its social science sects abroad both by training social scientists in the homeland and by sending experts abroad. The expense incurred was often borne by the United States government or by private foundations” (Gareau 1987: 602). America has been able, over the years, to use its doctrine of Free Flow of Information as a ‘highly effective ideological club’ to promote its political, economic and cultural values by whipping ‘alternative forms of social organization’ into a ridiculous defensiveness (Schiller 1977). In Africa, it has managed to dwarf the cultural legacies of former colonialists from Europe, including in higher education where American nomenclature and *manière de faire* have gained prominence (cf. Mazrui 1986: 247-8). The advent of the internet and its purported equalising potential for the developing world, does not seem to be achieving much in redefining unequal flows of information and cultural products between the West (epitomised by America) and Africa, the internet’s significant impact notwithstanding (van Binsbergen 2004).

Such dependence, in Africa, is compounded by the fact that the production of social scientific knowledge requires huge funds for university infrastructure from lecture halls to libraries, computers, laboratory equipment and research facilities, which not even the best scholars and institutions on the continent can easily afford (Zezeza 1997:70-86; Teferra and Altbach 2003; Zezeza and Olukoshi 2004; Odhiambo 2004). In terms of infrastructure and finance, well-endowed institutions like the University of Botswana and the historically white universities of South Africa are rare exceptions. What this means in practice is that most of the time African scholars studying Africa are forced to consume not literature and research output of their own production or choice, but what their affluent and better placed counterparts in North America and Europe choose to share with them at the peripheries. As Zezeza observes, ‘African knowledge’ is marginalised even in Africanist intellectual circles, which are:

... firmly rooted in a Western epistemological order and an academic culture driven by a ruthless ethos of ‘publish or perish’ and consisting of multinational publishing houses, university presses, peer review networks, citation and bibliographical conventions, and has little room to accommodate the alien views, voices, and visions emanating from Africa itself. In this scholarly treadmill, Africa appears nothing more than a research object to verify faddish theories that emerge with predictable regularity in the channel-surfing intellectualism of Northern academics. And so we get the strange spectacle of books and articles being churned out containing no reference to the scholarship produced in the countries and regions concerned... It is work that often contains the latest bibliographic references to Africanist research and rather dated facts, while the work of African scholars may contain dated bibliographical references and the latest facts (Zezeza quoted in Gray 2004:4).

Given that most university presses have virtually folded for lack of funds and support, and because of the indifference of scholars who have successfully broken into Western publishers, very little scholarly publishing of relevance is undertaken on the continent. Rare exceptions include the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and

Southern Africa (OSSREA). South Africa's university presses and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) are increasingly relevant as they purge themselves, in real terms, of the hierarchies of humanity and scholarship which informed apartheid. The New Jersey-based Africa World Press is equally active in redressing some of the imbalances and constraints facing African scholars and scholarship. I come back to CODESRIA's example below, given my current position as head of its publications programme.

The relationships between African scholars and their Western counterparts are unequal even in the rare cases where the collaboration is well meant. Often, cooperation takes the form of Western universities calling the tune for the African pipers they have paid. Collaborative research has often worked in the interest of the Western partners, who, armed with assumed theoretical sophistication and economic resources, have generally reduced their African collaborators to data collectors and research assistants. This concerns even the field of African studies, where Western Africanists appear as gatekeepers and Africans as gatecrashers (Mkandawire 1997; Berger 1997; Zeleza 1997; Prah 1998). Because the leading journals and publishers of Africa are based in the West and controlled by Western academics, African debates and perspectives find it very difficult getting fair and adequate representation. When manuscripts by Africans are not simply dismissed for being 'uninformed by current debates and related literature', they may be turned down for challenging orthodoxies and traditional assumptions about their continent (Cabral et al. 1998; Mkandawire 1997; Zeleza 1997). The handful of African academics who succeed in penetrating such gatekeeping mechanisms have often done so by making serious sacrifices in terms of the perspectives, methodologies and contextual relevance of their publications and scholarship (Prah 1998: 27-31). They have often chosen recognition over relevance, and have tended, quite uncritically, to celebrate a cosmopolitanism of perspective that is more assumed than negotiated or tested (cf. Mbembe 2000b), and that leaves little room for other possibilities of cosmopolitanism (Englund 2004). Unlike Steve Biko under Apartheid South Africa, they have had to conform rather than perish from daring to 'write what ... [they] like' (Malusi and Mphumlwana 1996), or from challenging beyond tokenism and rhetoric the catalogue of misrepresentations of African humanity and creativity.

Migrating to the West often does not help – even when the reasons for migration are most compelling (Odhiambo 2004), and could indeed exacerbate the problem, especially for those committed to African voices and perspectives critical of derogatory assumptions about their continent (Zeleza 1997; Falola and Jennings 2002). It has been observed that the most prominent voices in African studies today are 'diasporic intellectuals' whose 'inspiration comes perhaps more from nicely subtle readings of fashionable European theorists...than it does from...current local knowledge of the cultural politics of everyday life in the postcolonial hinterlands' (Werbner 1996: 6; see also Owomoyela 2001). Little wonder that the study of Africa continues to be dominated by perspectives that privilege analogy over the historical processes that should qualify Africa as a unit of analysis in its own right (Mamdani 1996: 12-13; Zeleza 1997). Although research on and in Africa has shaped the disciplines and our convictions of a supposedly universal truth (Bates et al. 1993: xiii-xiv), the quest for such universality has meant the marginalisation of African alternatives. What obtains has been nothing short of an epistemological imperialism that has facilitated both a Western intellectual hegemony

and the silencing of Africans even in the study of Africa (Chinweizu 1987; Mafeje 1998:26-29; Copans 1990: 305-395; Zeleza 1997; Obenga 2001). This makes the situation particularly precarious for young and upcoming African scholars, who are confronted by histories they cannot just ignore and write as if debates had never previously taken place. Epistemologically, they are compelled to start by knowing what is documented already, for them to see if there are any differences from or similarities with the African perspectives envisaged (Cf. Owomoyela 2001).

Often missing have been perspectives of the silent majorities deprived of the opportunity to tell their own stories their own ways or even to enrich defective accounts by others of their own life experiences. Correcting this entails paying more attention to the popular epistemologies from which ordinary people draw on a daily basis, and the ways they situate themselves in relationship to others within these epistemologies (Nyamnjoh 2001, 2004a). It also means encouraging ‘a meaningful dialogue’ between these epistemologies and ‘modern science’, both in its old and new forms (Devisch 2002), as way of enhancing rather than simply trampling and crushing the past with modern creativity. For publishers to play a part in this rehabilitation, a deliberate effort must be made to privilege people over profit, and to do more than reproduce the rhetoric of equality of humanity and the celebration of creative diversity. So far, publishing Africa for most is much less an ideological commitment than a commercial option, with the consequence that nurturing and promoting African creativity and scholarship are considered a much less viable investment than simply investing in reproducing the prejudices implicit in *Semper aliquid novi ex Africa*.

### **Redeeming Africa from the Heart of Darkness: CODESRIA as an example**

We Africans have become experts at dissemblance: saying all the right things about marginalisation, exploitation and acculturation, but behaving in ways that contradict our pleas for valorisation of our humanity, creativity and scholarship. Rhetoric and visions aside, everyone of us is running away from Africa, each at our own level, from the elite few who beg and bank abroad and who shop around for foreign citizenship for their unborn children, to scavengers appropriating the refuse dumps of the rich and powerful consumers of foreign products. These contradictions I have explored in detail elsewhere (Nyamnjoh 2004b). Many attempts have been made at various institutional and individual levels since the 1960s, but most of it has either remained sterile rhetoric or petered out at the level of implementation. State-driven cultural renaissance movements (e.g. *authenticité* of Mobutu (Zaire), *négritude* of Senghor (Senegal), *Consciencism* of Nkrumah (Ghana), *Ujamaa* of Nyerere (Tanzania), *Harambee* of Kenyatta (Kenya), *African Renaissance and Ubuntu* of Mbeki (South Africa)) have hardly gone beyond the conceptual rhetoric fed by intellectuals and politicians (Soyinka 1994b; Odhiambo 2004). The rhetoric might be right, but the ruling elite (with many of us intellectuals in their ranks) has ‘progressively take [n] on the look of strangers in their own country due to their daily lifestyle, modelled on that of *homo consumens universalis*’ (Amin 1980:175). Comporting ourselves as if we were not wholly unconvinced by Western assumptions of our inferiority, we the elite consume foreign as a major way of staking claim to power locally and of further mystifying the disaffected populations with whom we have lost credibility. Thus, instead of fighting marginalisation of Africanness in principle and practice, we intellectual and political leaders have tended to settle for the status of

‘superiors’ among ‘inferiors’ on the hierarchy of humanity established by whiteness (Fanon 1967,1969:166-99; Nyamnjoh 2004b:55-70).

It is against this background of compelling rhetoric and confounding contradictions that the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), like other like-minded institutions on the continent and elsewhere, has sought to make a contribution towards revalorisation of African humanity and creativity through scholarly research and publication. Since its creation in 1973, CODESRIA has entrusted itself with the mission of promoting multidisciplinary social research which derives from and is relevant to the experience of Africa and Africans. Its creation was partly motivated by a perceived need for greater recognition and representation for what Africa and African social scientists had to offer in debates where they often were reduced to passive observers whose role was to implement and not to think. The high rejection rate for African scholarship in Western journals and books, for example, meant that African scholars had basically to choose between bending over backwards to accommodate debates whose origins and assumptions were at variance with the burning questions and concerns of their continent, or to create and sustain alternative outlets for their own research informed by greater relevance in theory and practice, and in tune with the diverse expectations and aspirations of Africans. Providing for a strong publications and dissemination component of CODESRIA, was indicative of the determination by its founders to pursue independence of thought and scholarship vis-à-vis prevalent evolutionary assumptions, as well as a critical engagement with the African world.

CODESRIA cannot claim to have eliminated orthodox scholarship altogether, but it has created room for and actively promoted critical and predicament-oriented research and scholarship on Africa, aimed at sensitizing policymakers, advocacy groups and practitioners of orthodox scholarship. By so doing it has ensured that such scholarship does not perish simply because of gatekeeping aimed more at protecting power and privilege than at promoting science. Thanks to efforts by CODESRIA, not even the poor state and finances of university presses and the political repression suffered by academics in various countries have thwarted the dreams of the scholarly community for independent critical publications on Africa by Africans. Notwithstanding the odd detour now and again, increasingly, social scientists have relied on CODESRIA as an understanding publisher of the what, how, and why of their scholarship, without necessarily sacrificing scientific expectations. One of the objectives of CODESRIA’s publications policy states clearly that ‘publications shall be of the highest scientific quality, achieved through a rigorous peer-review system sustained by African scholars and scholars of Africa.’ Carefully and critically applied, CODESRIA has been able to constitute a peer-reviewer data base of critical African and non-African scholars who are capable of ensuring representation for African scholarship without sacrificing the scientific quality of the scholarship. How effective the peer review system remains would depend on how receptive to innovative scholarship it is in practice, especially as the merits of peership must not be taken for granted (see Brenneis 2004:582-585). The fact that CODESRIA is not just a publisher, but also a sponsor of research, can only be an added advantage with such a critical attitude to the practices of the review panels that decide on the funding of research proposals.

Younger members of CODESRIA, studying or teaching under very difficult political, economic and scholarly conditions, are most likely to fall prey to readily

available literature on Africa that simply reproduces mainstream thinking and taken-for-granted assumptions. The support they receive from CODESRIA covers financial grants for fieldwork, provision of bibliographies, textbooks and journals, as well as courses in research methods and methodologies. As laureates of its Small Grants Programme younger scholars benefit from training offered at regional methodology workshops for graduate students. These workshops are designed to equip the younger generation of researchers with the latest research tools and materials, which they need for their research. They also provide an opportunity for the laureates to tap into the experience of proven researchers in their fields from within and beyond the continent. The interaction, which this programme offers older and younger scholars, not only promotes a structured system of 'mentoring' but also encourages an inter-generational and multidisciplinary dialogue.

Over the years, CODESRIA has developed different outlets for its scholarship. The bulk of publications in the form of books, monographs and working papers results directly from the research CODESRIA supports. Increasingly, books on targeted themes for general readership and for specific consumers are also commissioned. CODESRIA equally shops around for relevant scholarship of excellence produced without its support for publication, subject to mutually agreed conditions with the authors. It remains open to collaboration with various partners and advocacy groups whose vision, mission, and objectives are in tune with its own. In particular, CODESRIA works closely with various university faculties, departments and others to identify theses, dissertations, and other research work for publication. It publishes six bilingual and multilingual journals, and the *CODESRIA Bulletin*, which serves as a lively debating forum around new ideas and questions central to the quest for better understanding African experiences. It has recently launched the *Africa Review of Books*, a forum for a critical presentation of books produced on Africa within and outside the continent. Occasionally, it revives journals as part of its efforts at supporting the development of African scholarly associations.

CODESRIA's publications programme has successfully projected the output of African scholars, and contributed path-breaking works, some of which have won awards. These include: *A Modern Economic History of Africa*, by P.T. Zeleza (Noma Award for Publishing in Africa); *La Nette des Autres*, edited by J. Ki-Zerbo (Prix Rencontre de la Communauté européenne); *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* by P.T. Zeleza (Special Commendation, Noma Award); *Index of African Social Science Periodical Articles*, CODESRIA (Conover Porter Prize); *Sénégal: Trajectoires d'un Etat (1960-1990)*, edited by M.C. Diop (Honourable Mention Prix Rencontre de la Communauté européenne); and *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*, by Claude Ake (Choice Outstanding Academic Title Award). CODESRIA publications have also served as the springboard to international recognition for many renowned African scholars, including some who have occupied important functions in its management and scientific structures.

Though one can certainly make a difference, the challenges highlighted in this paper are much too heavy for any single individual or institution adequately to address. While CODESRIA and like-minded institutions such as OSSREA might have the right vision, African writers and scholars, it takes dedicated commitment to celebration of Africanness by Africans at every level, on the continent and in the diaspora, for others to take Africa and Africans seriously. Contradictions between our rhetoric and actions make others see through us too easily. So long as we privilege dissemblance and effortless

rhetoric about the value of being African; so long as our daily behaviour, attitudes and lifestyle have little room for the Africa for which we seek representation and recognition through our literature and scholarship; so long as we ourselves are not convinced that our humanity and creativity are second to none; so long as Africa is the heart of darkness - however indirectly - even to us Africans; it shall be more than a Herculean task publishing and reading Africa into dignity.

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