

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE BOOK FAMINE

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In October 1985 the International African Institute (IAI) in London organized a symposium on "The Book Famine in Africa."¹ The problem was placed before the Africanist community by comparing the "terrible dearth of books and other teaching materials that afflicts nearly all African countries south of the Sahara" to the food crises in Ethiopia and Mali, with the conclusion that though less "newsworthy" it would, unless remedied, "do incalculable long-term harm to Africa and the ability of its people to deal with the problems that beset it today."²

One would have expected problems in Uganda, ravaged by civil war, and indeed in 1982 it was reported that texts in many schools had been handed down for ten years and many school libraries had not had a new book since 1972.³ In the above symposium it was reported that not only universities like Makerere in Uganda but also Ibadan in Nigeria, once as good as their counterparts in Europe or America, were "falling back to the standard of rural junior colleges in the Deep South of the United States before the Second World War."⁴ Nigeria has seen its Naira so devalued that 50,000 Naira which bought \$69,000 worth of UNESCO coupons in 1983, bought only \$6,000 worth in 1990.⁵ These coupons are used to pay for photocopies requested from abroad.

Publishers spoke at the IAI symposium saying the market for books on Africa has so diminished that "only books of relevance to the North Atlantic market are still considered viable publishing propositions." Hans Zell, speaking of the reference works on Africa that he publishes reported that books that a few years before would have sold 1500 to 2000 copies now sold only 700-800 copies, and "this was largely attributable to the virtual collapse of the African markets."⁶

What was and is to be done? Subsidies to buy books and subscriptions. Projects to encourage indigenous publishers. Donations of newly published books and periodicals by publishers. Donations of used books and periodicals by individuals, groups, and libraries. All are being tried with varying degrees of success.

In 1988 Bade Onimode, professor of economics at Ibadan University and chairman of the London-based Institute for African Alternatives, spoke of effects of the "book famine" on a whole generation at school today. "The poorly-trained graduates would be the ministers and technocrats for the next 50 years. . ." He concluded that "without doubt, the long-term solution to the book crisis was printing in Africa. But there was short-term need for aid to ship books for all levels of education in Africa."⁷

A CONSORTIUM OF AFRICAN PUBLISHERS

The May 1991 catalog for the African Books Collective (ABC) has just arrived at my desk. It includes books from twenty African publishers in eight African countries on subjects from history to medicine as well as music and literature. It is a self-help project for distribution of African books in which one-third of the cost is retained for non-profit operation and two-thirds is sent to the African publisher. US customers are billed in dollars and receive only one invoice, no matter from how many different African countries they order. All titles are held in the ABC warehouse in Oxford, England, so orders are turned around within fourteen days.⁸

Two catalogs were issued in 1990, the first year of the project, the first catalog showing pictures of the modest ABC showroom and of its warehouse at Burford. Though donor funded to start, African publishers pay a membership fee and comprise the Council of Management. While providing an outlet for African publishers and opportunities for Africans to be published, this project helps counter the consequences of what has been called the "reverse famine" of Africa-published books abroad. Africanists in Africa rose to leadership in African Studies in the 1960s, but in recent years they have "slipped back" feeling isolated from and resentful of the scholars of the Western world.⁹

JOURNAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) developed the African Journal Distribution Program at the request of African scientists who had been unable to subscribe to journals at their institutions. The Program has grown from a group of seven societies in 1985-87 supplying twenty-six titles for forty recipient institutions to one hundred organizations supplying 191

titles for over 250 institutions in 1990. All journals are sent air freight, with 85% sent by the publisher and about 15% sent free of charge by the United States Information Agency and the United Nations Centre for Science and Technology for Development. Volume one, number one of *Notes*, a biennial newsletter for recipients was recently published by AAAS.¹⁰

Project coordinator, Lisbeth Levey, recently told Africana librarians about a planned pilot project to aid medical schools in Nigeria and about a just completed survey of recipient institutions to determine their computer and CD-ROM capabilities.¹¹

WILL THE THIRD WORLD BYPASS THE BOOK?

F. W. Lancaster continues to predict the paperless society and as a consultant in many developing countries he has promoted computers and telecommunications. They will, he believes, "provide an unprecedented opportunity for rapidly narrowing the gap between the information rich and information poor."¹² The information needs of the Third World have touched off a debate reminiscent of that after World War II about steps necessary to prepare for independence of colonies and trusteeships. World events overtook the debaters as the people involved could not wait.

The same is true of this debate. Anthony Olden argues from his eight years of experience as a librarian in Nigeria that promoting literacy among the majority of the people is more important than providing a "service for a tiny elite."¹³ A Nigerian library school student responds that planners need information technology as part of their attack on the illiteracy of some sixty percent of adult Africans as well as for preparing the managers of tomorrow in the schools. Africans must make a "selection of what is appropriate for Africa, rather than being welded to either the blanket policy of 'only the best or most modern technology is good enough for Africa' or the alternative blanket policy of 'nothing at all from the West is good for Africa.'"¹⁴

Support for African trade books raises little objection as it supports self-help. Its future, however, depends upon support by librarians in Europe and America through purchase of books written by Africans, a perspective that should add to the cultural diversity of our collections resulting in mutual benefit. The donation of subscriptions to African universities is aid and therefore, though desperately

needed, must be temporary. An interesting new proposal offers a "barter" system for periodical subscriptions.

THE CURRENCY QUESTION

The African Imprint Library Services (AILS) supplies African publications of all types from some 40 African countries to libraries or individuals in this country on an approval basis according to a subject and/or country profile. They will also search for an individual title. Under this mutually beneficial proposal developed by AILS and Faxon, an African library would choose up to a certain dollar amount from Faxon's list and pay AILS the subscription price in local currency. AILS would pay Faxon in dollars and use the local currency to purchase local publications for export. This plan seems simple but may have complications with regard to central banks and government currency restrictions. It also depends upon the demand in America for publications from that African country.¹⁵

TEXTBOOKS AND LANGUAGE, CONTINUING DILEMMAS

In one of a series of commentaries in *West Africa* about the book famine, it was noted that over two-thirds of the texts used for journalism in West Africa came from the US.¹⁶ This is not a problem unique to Africa, for as Altbach and Kelly note, most Third World nations are dependent upon texts produced in Western countries, and for the sciences usually upon works in English. Translation is not always the answer because Western texts are often translated complete with foreign examples. The domination of the paper market by Canada, Sweden and the US and inadequacies of the educational support structure and the printing facilities, may make even works by indigenous authors better and more cheaply produced abroad.¹⁷

A number of publishers and organizations, here and abroad, are involved in supplying millions of surplus and used books to the developing world. As noted in *West Africa* "the result as usual, is that what arrives in Africa is what some people wish to give away, not what Africa needs." He cites an example of British texts no longer used being sent to Africa. His comments are illustrated with a loader dropping books at what is labelled a "dumping ground."¹⁸ Speakers at conferences have cited many other examples of dumping books originating here as well as overseas. While our *West Africa* commentator would advocate refusal of book/food aid, most speakers on the

subject emphasize instead the importance of selection of materials by the recipients from what is offered.

SMALL PROJECTS CAN BE MUTUALLY REWARDING

More than a thousand books from the pupils at the pioneer Elementary School in Olympia, Washington were sent in 1987/88 to schools in the island country of Mauritius. An ALA library book fellow working with the Mauritius Ministry of Education wrote home about the need for books and suggested a "sister library."¹⁹ This project was educational for the American children as well because they studied a country about which they had previously known nothing. Also present were contacts at each end to communicate needs and handle what are often complicated and expensive procedures. The idea of a "sister library" is a good one and its development could benefit from the experiences of sister city projects.

The New York African Studies Association (NYASA) in 1990 sent the books of a professor, who no longer taught about Africa and whose titles were already in his college library, to a university library in Argentina that was just beginning a program on Africa. The appeal for books had been seen in the *ALA News* by a member who knew of the collection and the NYASA president suggested the organization pay for shipment. A list of titles was sent to the university which accepted them all. Eleven boxes were mailed in April and received in July. The professor received a formal letter of thanks for his donation.²⁰ Out of print books are hard to locate even when libraries have adequate funds.

Librarians contacted by faculty or others to donate books or runs of journals often find that most of the titles are already in the collection. This may not so often be true in the future. To aid in this the International Council for Scientific Unions is preparing a set of guidelines for donation of scholarly materials. Still in draft form they will advise how to assess the relevance of materials, tell how to contact potential recipients, and discuss arrangements for packing a shipping. The African Studies Association Archives-Libraries committee is preparing a handbook and directory to be for sale in a few months that will also contain these guideline.²¹

GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ALWAYS ENOUGH

Upon returning from an ASA panel in 1989 on the book famine, an Indiana University librarian matched a long run of *Biological Abstracts* to a willing university recipient in Nigeria. She contacted several donor organizations like those listed in the directories at the end of this article. She learned that most do not pay for shipment in the US, some will only send to countries where they have projects at the time, some consider a ton of books as in the case of the *Biological Abstracts* too few to send, and with some you pay all costs—they handle packing, shipping, and other arrangements. The librarian after a year of effort paid for the transportation in the US herself, but found an organization that would cover shipping to Nigeria. She reports that donations can involve much time and many phone calls.²²

Donations of materials weeded from state university collections in New York, or even gift books and journals never added to the collections, cannot be given away due to provisions of section 178 of the New York State Finance Law. As state property they must be advertised for bid and if no bid is received they are sent to a landfill or recycled. Some state funded libraries have ignored these provisions with no problems, while others have been audited and forced to comply. In one such case a donating professor complained after finding at a local library fair items he had given to a local university and in another case books sent to a landfill provoked letters of outrage to newspapers and officials. To remedy this I was able to have introduced into the current legislature a bill that would exempt library books and journals.

A RATIONALE FOR BOOK AND JOURNAL DONATIONS

In the “viewpoint” article in a recent library publications, Steven Smith, a Texas A & M librarian, writes of the value placed by the public on the printed word and the ambivalent position of the librarian. A friend contacted him while searching for a home for his treasured collection of forty five years of *National Geographic* magazines. Offering no solution, the librarian fears he has doomed what his friend calls a cultural treasure to the dumpster and imagines “stacks and stacks of glossy print soon to become plumes and plumes of black smoke.” In the same journal issue is an article recommending library recycling. Not a bad idea for everything *except* books and journals.²³

There is a circular on my bulletin board for a donor organization soliciting funds that begins "Does it bother you to throw a book away?" Yes it bothers me. It also bothers me when my library and many others recycle last year's journals replaced by shelf-saving microform. What we should be talking about is resource-sharing. The librarian's need to find a home for a book or journal that the library does not want or need should be as great as the need of that other library to receive it and the results seen a mutually beneficial. The librarian should support projects that will make materials authored by Third World writers available in order to develop a much-needed cultural diversity in our collections as well as to promote publishing in Third World countries. The International Relations Committee of the American Library Association has discussed the problem and the need for guiding librarians, but has so far taken no action. Meanwhile, the following directories list organizations that should be of help.

DIRECTORIES

Book Network for International Development and Education, *Guide to Networking*, Ottawa: Canadian Organization for Development Through Education, 1988. CODE has had an extensive book program of its own since 1959. They prepared this guide to locate and work with counterparts. It is available for \$5.00 from CODE at 321 rue Chapel, Ottawa, Canada K1N 7Z2.

Childs, William M., *American Donated Books Abroad: A Guide to Distributing Organizations*, Washington: American International Book Development Council, 1989. More detailed than the CODE guide, but less inclusive, this guide covers some thirty-six organizations that regularly collect books for free distribution to the third world.

Kaston, Carren, *The Community of the Book: A Directory of Selected Organizations and Programs*, Washington: Library of Congress, 1986. Not reviewed.

Priestly, Carol, "The Book Famine: A Selective Directory for Book and Journal Assistance to Universities in Africa," *Africa*, 1990, p.135-148. Includes programs of European countries not part of the above guides.

Notes

1. "The Book Famine in Africa: IAI Symposium," *The African Book Publishing Record*, 1985, p.195.
2. Michael Crowder, "The Book Crisis: Africa's Other Famine," *Africa Bibliography*, 1985, p.xvi-xxi.
3. Ibid.
4. "The Book Famine in Africa," *ibid.*
5. Presentation by Mrs. Adebimpe O. Ike, University Librarian, Tajewa University, Bauchi, Nigeria, at a meeting of the African Studies Association Book Famine Task Force in Baltimore, November 1990.
6. "The Book Famine in Africa," *ibid.*
7. "Africa's Book Crisis," *West Africa*, February 29, 1988, p.355.
8. For a catalog write the African Books Collective Ltd., the Jam Factory, 27 Park End Street, Oxford OX1 1HU, England.
9. Michael Crowder, *ibid.*
10. For more information write the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1333 H. Street N.W., Washington D.C. 20005.
11. Notes from a meeting of the African Studies Association Archives-Libraries Committee in Washington D.C. on April 20, 1991.
12. Anthony Olden, "Opinion Paper: Sub-Saharan Africa and the Paperless Society," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 1987, p.296-304.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Mutawakilu A. Tiamiyu, "Sub-Saharan Africa and the Paperless Society: A Comment and a Counterpoint." *Journal of the ASIS*, 1989, p.325-328.
15. For information write the African Imprint Library Services, P.O. Box 350, Falmouth, MA 02574.
16. Kole Omotoso, "Because of Another Famine," *West Africa*, December 1989, p.2090.
17. Philip G. Altback and Gail Kelly, *Textbooks in the Third World*, New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1988, p. 3-17.
18. Kole Omotoso, "Book Famine," *West Africa*, November 1989, p.1839.
19. "Children Send Books to African School Library," *American Libraries*, April 1988, p.248.

20. "NYASA and the Book Famine," *New York African Studies Association Newsletter*, Fall 1990, p.1.

21. Gretchen Walsh, chair of the African Studies Association Book Famine Task Force, is editing this handbook and directory. To receive notice upon publication write the ASA, Emory University, Credit Union Building, Atlanta, GA 30322.

22. Meeting of Book Famine Task Force, April 20, 1991.

23. New Yorkers wishing to support passage of this bill should write their Assembly and Senate representatives citing A.4555 or S.2860.

