



T Looking Back, Looking Ahead

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BOOK FAIRS IN AFRICA

THE prospect of a book fair conjures, for many, a time for celebration and an atmosphere of conviviality, revolving round the book. Shorn of its festive excitement, a book fair is historically a marketplace, a meeting point for book buyers and sellers. But in these dying decades of the twentieth century, and with the advent of the electronic media, it has become imperative to re-examine UNESCO's definition of a book as having at least forty-nine(!) pages to one which takes cognisance of the digital dimensions of the book. Consequently, it is usual at book fairs these days, not only to see printed books on display, but also paperless books, for example audio books, video tapes, CD-ROMS, computers etc.



In Africa there seems to be an effervescence of book fairs as the twentieth century draws to a close. There are seven notable international book fairs across the length and breadth of Africa. North of the Sahara, the two notable ones with strong Arabic flavour are the Cairo (Egypt) and the Casablanca (Morocco) book fair. South of the Sahara, there are two important book fairs, namely the Dakar (Senegal) and the recently established Accra (Ghana) book fairs. While these two West African book fairs are biennial and designed to alternate with each other, the Dakar book fair has a strong francophone flavour, while the Accra one has a preponderance of anglophone participation. Farther south is the Nairobi (Kenya) book fair, and farther south still is the Harare (Zimbabwe) fair, as well as the Cape Town (South Africa) book fair.

If we divide Africa into four zones or circuits, namely north, south, east and west it is obvious that the spread of book fairs across the continent is fairly even and strategic. Perhaps, considering the vastness of the African land mass, one is tempted to suggest that there is some room for one more fair at the centre, probably in Zaire. But the existing book fairs (as they stand now) have a fairly even geographical spread upon which to build a continental book fair, should the need arise in the future.

The aim of this article is not to describe what all these fairs do but to take a broad view of the development of book fairs in Africa, examine successes and failures and provide leads towards their sustainability into the twenty-first century.

There is no doubt that for a book fair to thrive there should exist in a country some degree of book infrastructure, namely publishing houses, printing presses, bookshops, libraries, etc. Next there should exist a large enough reading public to patronise the book fair and committed individuals who will give their time and energy to propel the book fair forward. Ideally if there exists trade associations in the book industry and a system of district as well as regional book fairs, culminating in a national book fair - all the better. The strength of the international book fairs in Cairo, Dakar, Accra, Nairobi and Harare lies in the development of book-related activities throughout the year which provide the impetus for the organisation of the big event such as an international book fair.

It is worthy to note that some countries like Uganda, Namibia, Zambia, Cote d'Ivoire and Nigeria, have, with varying successes, organised book exhibitions over the years. In the case of Nigeria, there could be as many as forty localised book exhibition¹ in any one year throughout the country. Nigeria has had the fortune (or misfortune) in the early 1970s at the height of the oil boom, to organise the famous Ife Book Fair which drew strong participation from overseas and within Africa, especially West Africa. In course of time, this important book fair had gone the way of flesh. An important factor which spelled the doom of this well-meaning international event was

because the fair owed its propulsion to a few committed individuals - like Hans Zell and Adegbomire - whose relocation to other areas of interest (Hans Zell later went to the UK while Adegbomire changed jobs) resulted in the collapse of the fair. Another factor is the apathy of the Nigerian government itself.

This raises the question of: to what degree governments should be involved in the organisation of book fairs in Africa. In an era of increasing democratisation of institutions and encouragement of private enterprise as an engine of growth for African economies, there is the strong temptation to dismiss government involvement as mere humbug in profit-generating events like book fairs. Too much government can be harmful; but in the same vein no government too can be equally harmful. The two extremes should be avoided, but the question is to what degree. What role can a government play in the successful organisation of book fairs? Careful analysis reveals that the role of the government should be limited to creating an enabling environment in which a book fair can thrive. This it can do through passing legislation which is favourable to the book trade. For example, it can remove tariffs on books and ensure easy and quick customs clearance at the ports.

Sometimes the impetus for a book fair can be provided by an external factor. This was the case in Namibia. In 1993 the organisers of the Frankfurt Book Fair decided to hold a mini book fair in Namibia. This provided an opportunity for publishers in Namibia to exhibit their books. People were astounded at the extent and the range of locally published titles. The book fair proved a success. The point here is that, left to themselves members of the Namibian Publishers Association did not think of organising a book fair of their own² until an outside catalyst came in the form of a German book fair agency organising a book fair. This made the Namibian publishers sit up and realise that this was something they should be doing regularly to showcase their publishing strength, as well as to develop local interest in books.

Book fairs are becoming popular with ordinary people in Africa. One has only to see the long queues at the gates in Cairo, Harare, Nairobi, Accra etc to believe that the book hunger which has plagued Africa since the 1960s has not been assuaged. For many, a book fair is an opportunity to view books as well as purchase them. This is why some African book fairs which are patterned on models in Europe and other industrialised countries (where mostly books are viewed rather than bought) had better take a second look at this practice. To the publisher, a book fair is an opportunity to display one's own titles as well as view titles from other colleagues and take rights to publish them locally. He, as a businessman is looking for opportunities to advance his business. Not so the average African book user or book fair attendee. For the latter, a book fair is an opportunity, not only to view books but also to buy them. To him a book fair is an extension of the bookshop, an opportunity to buy titles

that he wants, but which for one reason or the other, were not available in his local bookshop. To succeed, any book fair in African needs to take cognisance of these two interest groups - the publisher and the book buyer. For the book fair to be worthwhile, the needs of these interest groups need to be addressed.

In that case, is there the need for book fairs to be Africanised or indigenised from the European models? The answer is, yes. If so what elements are germane to Africa whose incorporation in the organisation would make the book fair African?

In recent times the cultural dimension in many world book fairs is becoming increasingly felt. The Frankfurt book fair annually focuses on a selected country and endeavours to show that country favourably in the cultural limelight. The Zimbabwe book fair is no exception in efforts to highlight the local Zimbabwean culture in the areas of singing, drumming and dancing. Africa happens to be rich in culture and nobody will dispute the fact that the book is an artefact of culture; therefore it is fitting to use the occasion of a book fair to situate the event properly in a cultural context. Trade visitors, as well as exhibitors are always curious to acquaint themselves with local cultural realities and visit places of historical, tourist and cultural interest. In this the Zimbabwe book fair is playing an active part and leading the way. This should be encouraged.

The children's book fair in Kenya has successfully experimented with the idea of a reading tent and in no time other book fairs in Africa are introducing variants of the idea. A typical reading tent is really an improvised library where kids could gather and read books to their satisfaction. There are other outreach activities like story-telling either by the kids themselves or by an adult. In Tanzania, this writer saw a variant where parents read to their wards while other kids looked on. An interesting thing was that the parent who read best to his ward was given a prize. In Ghana, any child who volunteered to read his own poem or tell a story written by himself was given a book prize at their recent international book fair (November 1996). Another innovation which was introduced at the Accra book fair was an encounter between children and writers of children's books. All these child-centred activities encourage self-expression in children, enhance their creativity and promote self-assurance.

How can book fairs in Africa be sustained into the next century?

It is crucial that book fair organisers take more pains in fixing admission fees in such a way that everybody - parents and their wards can easily afford to attend the book fair many times over. There are those who argue that admission fees should be waived altogether. This would be unwise, for this would encourage vagrants to have easy access and cause mischief. Therefore it is reasonable that having invested so much in

organising a book fair, efforts must be made to recoup some of the expenses.

As a result of the start-up funds needed to successfully run a book fair, some organisers resort to donor funding. While such efforts can provide the much-needed financial relief, such funding from overseas has been noted to come with conditions. For example, the book fair organisers are restricted to use the money specifically for contingencies delineated by the overseas donor agency. This can be frustrating. The only way the organisers can have a free hand would be to look within and explore sponsorship (for some of the activities planned) from local companies. In the area of sports, some private companies have been known to be active sponsors. Why can this not be extended to book fairs? The Ghana international book fair held last November is on record for having successfully mobilised funds from local sources to the extent that it bagged the national television and radio in the process.

We have already mentioned how in Africa the expectation is that book fairs are an occasion to buy books. Therefore to ensure the future of book fairs in Africa this expectation should be fully met and honed even sharper. For example, exhibitors can be encouraged to reduce prices for books at such events in order to maximise sales as well as bait the general public. If they keep coming because of the bargains they hope to pick up at the book fair, this is a healthy development and would ensure the continuity of such events into the twentieth century.

In this brief survey of book fairs in Africa, it is clear that in terms of geographical spread, Africa has a good coverage. The only vacuum which needs to be filled is the centre, involving Zaire, Central African Republic, Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, which are all French-speaking countries. Unfortunately this zone is like a boiling cauldron - very unstable politically. Therefore in order to organise a successful international book fair, political stability is very essential. We noted that book fairs have a big potential in Africa but they need nurturing and direction for healthy development. In this, the government as well as the private sector need to play complementary roles. APNET as a continental network of African publishers also has a crucial role to play by providing a catalyst towards the healthy growth of book fairs in Africa. **GR**

Notes

1. Higo, A. 'The Usefulness of Book Fairs to African Publishers. Paper delivered at a Bellagio Group seminar in Accra on 6 November 1996 in Accra, Ghana.
2. Katjavivi, Jane shared this Namibian experience with participants at a seminar organised in Accra on 8 November 1996 during the international book fair in Accra, Ghana.