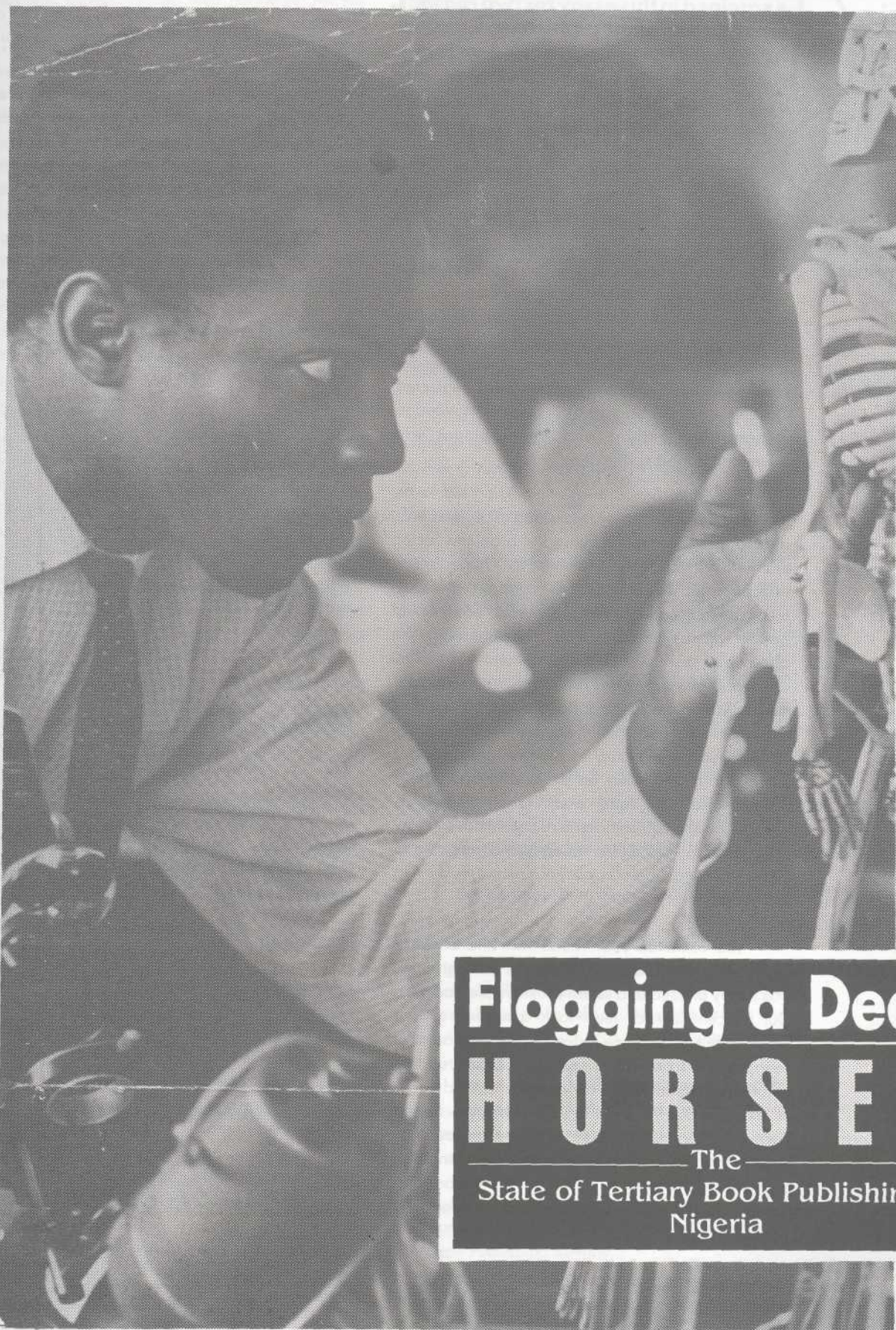




Flogging a Dead H O R S E ?

The
State of Tertiary Book Publishing in
Nigeria

DELIBERATE CHOICE OF tertiary book publishing will be examined in this essay for two reasons. One, Educational publishing as a son has the Government as its father through the various curricular and syllabi as designed to guarantee markets at the nursery/primary and secondary levels.

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Two, tertiary book publishing is an 'orphan', a horse neighing for attention and protection. Thus, ab initio, tertiary publishing was set on a journey to perdition as we shall later see. Forgive my choice of metaphor. Educational publishing gained momentum with the design of syllabi for schools and the actual production of local needs. Tertiary, including general books, which ought to have provided much needed catalyst for national development were neglected. The function of the book as a purveyor of knowledge, information, culture and development was examination and certificates.

This fatal omission or commission led to the lopsided development of publishing in Nigeria and, indeed, gave rise to the myriad of problems facing the industry today. The attempt to 'Nigerianize' education in Nigeria led to constant changes, inconsistencies and planlessness in our Educational System with its attendant toll on book publishing. The absence of a solid base for an authentic Nigerian-based publishing gave birth to the dearth of manpower needs. Raw materials disappeared at the sight of publishers. Modern printing equipment were pitifully in short supply and hard to procure. Government's duties, tariffs and taxes on books and accessories were, to say the least excruciating. However, importation of recommended texts flourished, courtesy of the goodwill of the then strong exchange rate and Government's deliberate policy of a secure readership and market.

The romance soon burst with the onset of depression and tertiary publishing, our resilient horse, was sorely bruised and laden with multiple fractures. Our nascent literacy level took a nose-dive. Our reading culture became more known on pages of newspapers. I am yet to see any vibrant reading culture built and nurtured on foreign imported books as experienced in Nigeria. Our libraries started journeys of varying degrees of decay, and became havens for cobwebs and cockroaches. Taking into cognisance the above ailments, promotion and distribution of books became a recurring headache to publisher.

Our worst fear was soon confirmed. It is a matter for 'celebration' that there is a book scarcity

in the land, when Britain, Canada, Europe, the US and other advanced countries were in the throes of a book hunger. A colleague and compatriot Mrs. O. Orimalade gave a graphic description in an article, 'Book subsidy scheme. The international experience' when she declared:

The book scarcity problem is largely at tertiary level. Nigeria has always depended heavily on importation of tertiary level books, and Nigerian publishers have concentrated mainly on publishing books at primary and secondary level... Imported books are now even more expensive than they used to be owing to the devaluation of the naira. Consequently, booksellers order very few copies of imported books for fear that students may not be able to afford them. Foreign exchange is also inadequate and inaccessible. The result, of course, is scarcity.

Close on the heels of scarcity was the problem of authorship. Our strong horse took up the gauntlet and textbooks emerged here and there on various disciplines. However, many of the books adorned the bookshelves in the absence of buyers. A literary work 'X', with a print-run of 1000 copies, and an international award to boot took over three years to sell out. Indeed, literary works such as poetry volumes, drama texts, novels and short stories (except where recommended for school-use) are hardly patronised. In certain cases, some booksellers do not accept them for display. With the advent of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in Nigeria, the devaluation of the Naira and a hyper-inflation; tertiary book publishing found itself on the surgeon's couch. Books became 'leprous' due to the budgetary constraints of most families. This economic problem gave nerve to other anti-book habits like photocopying and purchase of handouts on a massive scale by students at the tertiary level. Lamenting the situation, this writer in a write-up titled, 'Let us read', had remarked:

For us in the universe of books, our world now walks on its underbelly.

*The value of the printed word now crawls in rhythm with our changing times. Hitherto, books needed no introduction... Today, the classics and good literature have become alien to our bookshelves. It is now a matter of prestige and class to acquire books that no one wants to read... This is the reality which is our dilemma. Books have become endangered species, not sought after, seldom read, spurned and probably the least on a scale of wants. ***

A visit to some of our universities and higher institutions is all one needs to confirm the discomfited nature of tertiary and general books in Nigeria.

Business centres with photocopying machines have taken over completely. Students clutch foreign novels with folders holding their handouts. All the calculations and crisis point to one conclusion: TERTIARY PUBLISHING IS COMATOSE. Will the Government spearhead the revival train? Are our business moguls now ready to invest in the industry that holds little promise on their investment? When is the expected renaissance? As these thoughts engage my brain in battle, I remember that most great truths begin as blasphemies even as religions (seen as professions) are kept alive by faith.

I believe that our stallion must not be allowed to die. The process of restoration must begin with the Government. The ISSUE of a national literature (left in abeyance) with a Pan-Nigerian culture as its policy thrust will assist to create a readership that is unique. A reading culture cannot be created from without but from within. This will involve an enabling environment conducive to the production of books, mainly local, here in Nigeria. Also, the Government should remove all forms of impediments like duties and tariffs on publishing raw materials and equipment. This will lower production costs and make books affordable. The building of new libraries and the renovation of existing ones should be stepped up. Government can encourage the growth of publishing at the tertiary level by either subsidising the cost of production or buying a minimum of five copies of every published book in Nigeria supplied to at least five hundred selected libraries in major towns and villages. This translates to a sale of 2500 copies for every published book. This gesture is all the tonic the industry needs to remain healthy. Also, the reading culture, literacy level and manpower needs an overall development in all facets of the country's life and the economy will have received tremendous energising. As a matter of priority, the Government should complete and make functional the various paper mills at Jebba, Iwopin and Oku-Iboku.

The tertiary book publishers should be abreast with and knowledgeable in the areas of current publishing techniques. Emphasis should be placed on good quality books developed to meet the needs of specialised readers. The era of general publishing is gone as global trends indicate. With improvements in communication facilities and desktop publishing, small work-force, minimum overheads, specialisation, competitiveness, specific promotion and distribution efforts have become the vogue. In Nigeria, good books can be produced using newsprint and bond paper for the same title to meet the purchasing power of certain buyers. Where markets have been identified, minimal costs should be expended on promotion, publicity and distribution. Where applicable, books should be supplied by mail order.

In spite of the arguments against book launch, whether labelled vulgar, political, modest or literary it has become a veritable avenue for the quick circulation of new books ensuring an early return on the capital invested.

However, care should be exercised to avoid loss and pilferage.

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The tertiary book publisher should engage in consultancy services and offer printing services to corporate bodies by bringing their creativity to bear on these services. The export market is another area yet to be well explored by our tertiary book publishers. It is another option of survival provided the books are comparatively well-produced as the foreign ones. The creation of markets overseas for local books could be a rewarding source of foreign exchange earning. Rights for the production of new existing books should be negotiated with foreign publishers where possible, as this promotes interdependence, inter-cultural knowledge and growth.

The development of publishing in the local languages, on the long-run, will assure the tertiary publisher of a market as this has been found to be a strong method of promoting mass literacy and readership. This has been done with remarkable success elsewhere in Europe, America, Britain and in East Africa with Ngugi Wa Thiongo's works.

The strategies and suggestions offered here are by no means exhaustive but are meant to stimulate further discourse on tertiary book publishing in Nigeria with or without a depressed economy. **GR**

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***Remarks at the launch of Soul-Journey into the Night on 26 May 1993 at NIIA, Lagos.*