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African Literature in the Literary Market Place Outside Africa

Peter Ripken

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This article is the text of a speech delivered by the author at the 2nd African Literature Days in Hamburg, on 2 June 1990. The author has expanded it for publication in ABPR.

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Peter Ripken

Director, Society for the Promotion of African, Asian and Latin American Literature, Frankfurt.

African Literature in the Literary Market Place Outside Africa

"The biggest censors are the publishers."
Zimbabwean writer Stanley Nyamfukudzwa during the International Writers' meeting, Erlangen, September 1988

Introduction

There is a strange paradox about creative writing by African writers (whether on the continent or elsewhere): while politicians either praise them without reading them or persecute them because of their fear of the word, and while intellectuals praise them or scold them for a variety of reasons, it is difficult to ascertain who really reads them. On a continent with a recognized "book famine" and the number of readers going into millions in the various language areas, book publishing and book distribution (with the exception of educational books) is not high on the list of development priorities, hence many authors are still being published outside the continent while those who prefer to publish with African publishing houses suffer the fate of limited access to the reading public, because of distribution problems in the country of publication and beyond.

African literature in England, France and Portugal

England, France and Portugal are still far more important for creative writers from sub-Saharan Africa than Lagos, Harare, Dakar, or Abidjan – and the paradox goes even further because there their role is marginal at best. Although admittedly the number of books published in Africa has increased tremendously in the last decade, the amount of recognition an African writer can get is still dependent on the fate of his or her books outside Africa. Although there is – at least in some African countries – something like a literary debate, the bulk of publishing, reviewing, analyzing African literature – not to use the term canon formation – is still taking place outside Africa. And again, even there its importance on the literary market places in various countries is marginal: it's confined – again with a few exceptions – to a small ghetto of Africanists and well-wishers who are very often not part and parcel of the literary debates and the teaching of literature in their respective countries.

Such a sweeping statement calls for specification; of course it does make a difference whether a book by an African author is being published in its original language in Paris, London or Lisbon (or New York for that matter) or whether it can only be read in a translation (into Dutch, Italian, German, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish or Russian). Some of the best works by African authors have been published in England, France or Portugal by big transnational companies (which have their markets also in Africa, sometimes with increasing degree, in cooperation with local publishers); some have been published by smaller publishing houses with a specific 'African list' with the disadvantage of smaller print runs. But I doubt whether this situation goes beyond the old pattern of relations between the metropole and the periphery. Of course, there is a tendency at least in Paris to

perceive francophone African authors as an extension of French literature (and some authors do get published by big and prestigious publishing houses); there is a tendency also in England to perceive anglophone African literature as part of the New English literatures on the same level as, e.g., Canadian or Australian creative writing. But there are other factors which may show that creative writing by Africans continues to be marginal in the literary life of the metropole.

Serious reviews in large circulation papers or other mass media are few and far between, and then they are confined to those books which have been published in the metropole (a book published in Africa is hardly ever reviewed, simply because it is more often than not unavailable on the market of the metropole); if there are reviews, they are often written by a small number of 'experts' and Africanists, which to my mind is a special form of paternalism; serious reviews, however, do appear in a number of specialized magazines and journals, often with a strong "Third World" bias – which amounts to a ghetto situation from which most ordinary readers are excluded. This situation may be slightly better in France but again this is in line with perceiving francophone African writers as junior colleagues of the 'mainstream' writers. That there is little interest in African writing *per se* is evidenced by the fact that there are very few translations, e.g., from French into English or vice versa, or Portuguese into English or French on the respective markets, an indication that African creative writing is just a matter of the metropole-periphery syndrome. The situation may be slightly better in the United States of America, but this appears to be due to the existence of a larger Black community, which has resulted in the existence of a high number of African studies departments with attendant publications (for review and debate), but I doubt whether the general pattern is distinctly different. Of course there is no doubt that the internationally known African writers do get attention by mass media (like Chinua Achebe or Wole Soyinka), but I maintain that the broad spectrum of African literature is being ignored. In evidence I may point out that not only books published in Africa are hardly being noticed in Europe, but that all those written and published in national or regional languages are not only not translated but also being ignored (or sometimes even denigrated) by even the cognoscenti of African literature.

Finally, Africa's image in the North is definitely more influenced by writers such as the 'white Rhodesian' Wilbur Smith with his bestselling books than, e.g., by the novels by writers such as Chenjerai Hove or Dambudzo Marechera, if we stick to one country only.

Translations and the case of Germany

African literature on the market places of the former colonial metropolises may call for more analysis, but its role on the markets of countries where readers will have to rely on translations (if we

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