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From local to global. New paths for publishing in Africa¹

How can one's voice be heard on a global scale? Historically, the writing, selling, and reading of books has been a central means through which stories have been shared across distance. Despite the wide-ranging nature of print, however, in Africa, books and publishers still struggle to get their share of attention. Not only is the volume of African book production dramatically underrepresented in the world² but the African publishing industry has also had to contend with the ongoing legacies of former colonial monopolies. At the same time, if printing books and selling them across national borders has always been one of the main stumbling blocks to the African publishing trade, then it is reasonable to think that the new technologies and media that have emerged at the turn of the millenium might enable the written word to travel more easily across the continent and beyond, expanding the reach and circulation of African publishing, and African knowledge, today.

In this paper, I would like to look at these issues with reference to Benedict Anderson's seminal work, *Imagined communities*³. In doing so, my focus will not be on nationalism, as is so often the case in studies of Anderson, but rather the other major and interconnected notions which appear in his work, "capitalism"; "print-languages" and "imagined communities", as terms important in the publishing field where one publisher has to sell books to a community of readers that constitutes itself through one of the print-languages available in the country. In Africa, these are often European languages like English, French and Portuguese though other languages such as Arabic or Kiswahili are also important. Following Anderson, my argument questions the constitution of communities that identify themselves through shared discourses and values. Do such communities exist? If texts published in Africa constitute a part of the fabrication of these communities, how do they reach people inside and beyond national boundaries? In answering these questions, issues of uneven trading relationships, identity and new technologies will be taken into account, as will the relationship between local and global: is it possible to "relocate" African literature on the continent, and to what extent? What can we learn from the popular success of a book serie like *Adoras* in Ivoiry-Coast or of the use of new media by the Tanzanian author Eric Shigongo? In a world where dematerialization is ever-developing, does the distribution of African cultural production become easier?

Communities of readers, print-languages and states policies

If the written word has historically held less weight than the spoken word in African cultures, it is nonetheless true that some rulers and politicians saw its possibilities for empowerment early on. On return from London, in 1902, for instance, Ham Mukasa underlined how impressed the Katikiro, the Prime minister of Buganda, had been by the books he had seen at the University library⁴. The idea that

¹ This is a longer version of an article published in *Wasafiri*, issue n° 88 (December 2016). I am indebted to Ruth Bush and Madhu Krishnan for revising and improving my English and to Raphaël Thierry for all the additional details he gave me.

² An often quoted figure is the one of 2 or 3% of the world's production but there are really few datas in the publishing field for Africa and UNESCO ceased to give statistics in 1999. For further information, see Hans Zell, « How many books are published in Africa ? » in *The African Book Publishing Record*, vol. 40, n°1 (2014)

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, reflection on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso, 1983 (first edition).

⁴ Apolo Kagwa, Prime Minister of Buganda, had been invited to the Coronation of Edward VII in London. His secretary, Ham Mukasa, fluent in English was also invited and became the one to write down the

the printed word was powerful as well as useful had gained more and more recognition since the first missionaries had begun to turn books into more familiar objects. After the wave of independences in the 1960s in Africa, a significant number of politicians aimed to introduce cultural policies where books had a role to play. They were helped by the UNESCO observatory on cultural policies which was also active in supporting the publishing industry in Africa (especially in the 1970-1980). One notable example of this trend was the establishment, by Leopold Sedar Senghor, president of Senegal and man of letters in his own right, of the Nouvelles Editions Africaines in 1972. It is important to note that, from the beginning, this publishing house was linked to France as five French publishers were financially part of it. On the other hand, founded in the era of Pan-Africanism, the publishing house was also based on a partnership between Senegal, Ivory Coast and Togo. Elsewhere, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, himself a teacher and a translator, gave in his Arusha Declaration a paramount place of importance to culture and developed both Kiswahili as a national language and the printing industry as a means of education and in order to spread his message of *Ujamaa*. In Algeria, too, the state was very much involved in the publishing industry, having nationalized the Hachette group in Algeria. This act had led, in 1966, to the birth of the Société Nationale d'Édition et de Diffusion (SNED) that became ENAL (Entreprise Nationale du Livre Algérien) in 1983. This state entreprise controlled a great part of what has been published until 1998 (when it disappeared and let more space to independent publishers).

Given this context, it is reasonable to wonder to what extent the strong national policies developed around the education of citizens in the early years of independence had an impact or contributed significantly to the development of books on the continent. As state policies have been extremely diverse in Africa, it is of course impossible to give a precise answer; at the same time, one can point out that globally the spread of education in Africa resulted in an increased number of readers on the continent. The ultimate effect of this effort to improve literacy varied across countries, however; some countries encouraged education in African languages (Tanzania is one of the best examples, where Kiswahili is taught to all children from primary school), while others relied only on European ones. The importance of this distinction is not because, as some would say, only African languages can sustain a community of African readers⁵ but rather because publishing in African languages is somewhat less affected by the risk of having its economy directly challenged by the publishing houses of the former colonies: if publishers provide books in non-European languages that people can read, they have fewer opportunities to compete with Western publishers. This supposes, of course, that some African languages have developed into print-languages, though in reality only a small subset have, including Kiswahili, Arabic, Afrikaans, Amhara and to a lesser extent Yoruba, Wolof, Bambara and Fula⁶.

The question of an economic competition with publishers from the Western world is important because even if independent African states were willing to build up a national publishing industry, they were not always able to secure this activity. If Pan-African cooperation was the rule in the beginning, this sort of cooperation has since largely eroded, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. For example

travelogue. Simon Gikandi (ed.), *Uganda's Katikoro in England by Ham Mukasa*, Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1998, p. 115-116 for example.

⁵ Benedict Anderson aptly states that « Le facteur de loin le plus important, en matière de langues, c'est leur capacité à engendrer des communautés imaginées, à construire effectivement des *solidarités particulières*. Après tout, les langues impériales sont encore des langues vernaculaires, et donc des langues vernaculaires particulières parmi bien d'autres. » (Benedict Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 138).

⁶ Apart from the seminal work by Alain Ricard, *Littératures d'Afrique noire. Des langues aux livres*. Paris: CNRS/Karthala, 1995, 304 p., we can also mention Karin Barber's work on Yoruba literature (especially the latest: *Yorùbá Print Culture and the First Yoruba Novel: I.B. Thomas's 'Life Story of Me, Sẹgilọla' and Other Texts*. African Sources for African History series. Leiden: Brill, 2012) and Kate Skinner's book to come: *Ablode Safui (the Key to Freedom): Writing the New Nation in a West African Border Town 1958-63* (estimate date of publication : 2017)

Nouvelles Editions Africaines ceased to trade in 1988, becoming instead the more nationally-bounded Nouvelles Editions Africaines du Sénégal. With the economic crises in West Africa and the economic liberalisation of countries in East Africa, most African states cancelled entire sections of cultural affairs, leaving new independent publishers to cope with the work, which was not without difficulties, notably the cost of raw materials such as paper. Despite the Florence Agreement⁷, the cost of paper remains prohibitive to this day, preventing African publishers from being able to issue products that could be sold at a cheap price. Indeed, even with the growth of the middle classes in various countries in Africa, the cost of books remains beyond the average household's means. Thus, it seems that the emergence of a community of readers is perhaps not the main issue facing African publishers. Rather, it is the lack of financial support from the state and at the local scale which leaves African publishers in a relatively non-competitive position at the global level.

“Under pressure”: challenging ongoing difficulties by offering new alternatives

During the 1990s, a period in which a severe depression hit Francophone Africa, numerous states tended to limit their involvement in the cultural field. At the same time, structural adjustment programs established by the World Bank contributed to take over the school curricula, at the expenses of local publishers. Far from being intimidated by the rather gloomy prospects, however, independent publishers have continued to emerge and new publishing houses were founded: Jamana (1988, Mali) ; Edilis (1992, Ivory Coast) ; Sankofa & Gurli (1995, Burkina-Faso) ; Donniya (1996, Mali). Others were to follow in the 2000' as Barzakh (2000, Algeria); Eburnie (2001, Ivory Cost) ; Proximité (2002, Cameroun)... These publishing houses, all of which are still currently active, have worked hard to develop their lists and establish a steady readership. If never joining any kind of supra-national union, nearly all of them nevertheless became members of the French-language network of the Alliance Internationale des éditeurs indépendants⁸ and gained much from the meetings among peers from all over the world and the advocacy actions led by the structure. Despite their efforts, however, difficulties remain, including the relatively small proportion of potential book buyers on the African continent and the problems associated with the distribution of books. In some countries only a few existing bookshops are available to sell locally-produced material, a situation which is made worse when publishers attempt to find markets outside of their home countries. Indeed, the inadequacy of the book distribution system is one of the big issues for publishers operating on the African continent. In order to develop readerships, it is essential that books are well-publicised so that potential readers are made aware of their existence and that a physical infrastructure exists to allow the purchase of books. Neither of these two points is easy in the current African context, and both are made more difficult in a transnational context in which it is often challenging simply to get information regarding what is published, let alone find an outlet through which to purchase specific books, even if *African Books Collective* or *Afrilivres* do help a lot in increasing the visibility of the African book production, as we shall see later on.

⁷ The Florence Agreement (1950) and its Protocol (known as “Protocol of Nairobi”, 1976), sponsored by Unesco, aim at making it easier to “import educational, scientific or cultural materials. They reduce tariff tax, currency and trade obstacles to the international circulation of these materials permitting organization and individuals to obtain them from abroad with less difficulty and at less cost.) Guide for the application of the Florence Agreement and its Protocol, portal.unesco.org/culture/ accessed January 2016.

⁸ See: <http://www.alliance-editeurs.org/-les-editeurs-#rl23> (accessed June 2016).

These difficulties are all the more important since they tend to reinforce the dynamics of extraversion rooted in the fact that both printing activity and the publishing field in Africa have emerged through the missionary presence and then through the structures of colonization. To the present day, ties between African and western institutions remain close. We mentioned above that French publishers were financial partners of the Nouvelles Editions Africaines since its birth, as for today, Edicef (a subsidiary of Hachette – which means Lagardère) is one of the major investors in Nouvelles Éditions Ivoiriennes. Relationships are often uneven as larger and better-resourced northern publishers share the same playing-field with their counterparts on the continent. Politics of “developing” books and reading in Africa thus sometimes only sustain foreign domination of the African market at the expense of independent local publishers. In the context of francophone Africa, for example, some publishing houses like Gallimard (through its collection “Continents noirs”) or Présence Africaine are able, through various policies, to sell their books in Africa at reduced prices.⁹ While advantageous for local readers, this policy doesn’t help local publishers gain visibility in their own countries. The same logic is at work with a structure like the Centrale de l’Édition via its Programme Plus, supported by the French Ministry of Culture and Communications, which makes it possible to buy books published in France at 65% cheaper than the original price. As for booksellers from Francophone Africa, they also benefit from the guarantees offered by the Coface, a French export-credit insurer. Raphaël Thierry, in his well-documented essay on the book market in Africa, writes : “Si l’on s’en réfère aux chiffres du rapport 2008 de la Centrale de l’Édition, l’Afrique représente, pour le marché français 38 980 000 euros d’exportation d’ouvrages contre 1 030 000 euros d’importation, soit un rapport d’environ un ouvrage importé contre trente-neuf exportés. »¹⁰ Such figures speak for themselves. And private initiatives do not make things easier for African publishers. Consider the case of L’Harmattan, the Parisian publishing house which recently started a network of bookshops in countries like Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and many others, mostly selling their own Paris-printed publications (including unsold books from France).¹¹ As a consequence, in Africa, and especially in its francophone countries, it is often easier to access books published in Europe over those published on the continent. The publications are more visible (famous African writers are still published in Paris, even if it is true that some of them – Patrice Nganang, Henri Lopes, Boubacar Boris Diop, Ken Bugul to name but a few – are also published in Africa), it’s easier to buy them, and, as we have just seen, sometimes they are even cheaper. The schoolbook market is a particularly blatant example of the European grip on the book trade in francophone Africa. A highly lucrative field, recent studies suggest that 85% percent of the textbook market share is monopolized by Hachette International in the region,¹² a figure made all the more significant when we recall the importance of education in the development and shaping of reader-communities. The fact is all the more harmful as this schoolbook market is nearly the only profitable sector where publishing is concerned. In comparison, in Anglophone

⁹ Gallimard has decided to sell its books in Africa to the single tariff of 9,50 euros (roughly half of the average price in France), which is still quite a significant amount for francophone Africa. Books published by Présence Africaine sometimes benefit from subsidies to lower their prices in Africa.

¹⁰ Raphaël Thierry, *Le marché du livre africain et ses dynamiques littéraires. Le cas du Cameroun*. Pessac : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, coll. « Littératures des Afriques », 2015, p. 19. « If we refer ourselves to the report published by the Centrale de l’Édition in 2008, the figures are such as follow : French publishers sell for 38 980 000 euros in Africa, whereas, in the same time, importation of books published in Africa amounts to 1 030 000 euros. The ratio is thus 39 books exported per 1 book imported.”

¹¹ For further information, see www.harmattan.fr/groupeharmattan/harmattan-etranger.html (accessed January 2016).

¹² Brigitte Perruca, « La France règne en maître sur le marché des manuels scolaires en Afrique francophone » in *Le Monde*, 10th of June, 2010, quoted in Raphaël Thierry, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

countries like Kenya or Tanzania, books and textbooks eligible for school curricula are most of the time issued locally in English as well as in Kiswahili.¹³

Working hand in hand to achieve success?

This rather gloomy picture could be daunting for many if it weren't for the stubbornness of publishers who are bringing together their energy and trying to determine solutions. If publishing in major European languages may be a drawback (as we've seen, it can mean a more direct competition with Western publishers), it can also be taken as an advantage, as shared languages also induce transnational networks that can enable wider cooperation and make it possible to work and think collectively. The *African Book Collective*, founded in 1989, is a good example of how an Oxford-based structure can help African publishers to gain a wider visibility on the continent and abroad. From its 17 original founding members, the association, which is owned and governed by African publishers¹⁴, has grown up to include now 149 members, mostly from Anglophone Africa but hosting more and more publishers from Francophone countries. English then serves as an efficient tool to highlight the African production, mostly in English, but not only. This successful initiative led to the creation, in 2002, of the French-speaking network *Afrilivres*¹⁵ which is also committed to increasing the visibility of African books. Despite any difficulties which it has faced, the association's platform provides its 33 publishers with a space where their books can be seen, even if they can't be ordered directly through the website (unlike ABC website that enables readers to buy online). It is to note that the issue of e-commerce is an important one, but that banking agreements are still hindering the African publishers' activity, as most payment sites (like Paypal for example) do not acknowledge African banks. It thus stifles the development of e-commerce and in fact, most of the time, when African publishers want to sell abroad (or even in their own countries), they often have no other option but to load with copies whatever car or luggage they have and to carry themselves their production. Institutions like *L'Oiseau indigo diffusion*, launched by Isabelle Gremillet who used to work for Actes Sud, is dedicated to enable the diffusion of African books, mostly in French, but also in Arabic or Wolof¹⁶. Pollen Diffusion, a structure specialized in the diffusion/distribution of independent publishers, also assume this role for a few publishing Houses from Maghreb (Elyzad, Tarik editions, Yomad).

Another way to circumvent the difficulties associated with book publishing in Africa is the emergence of initiatives such as "Terres solidaires" developed by the Alliance des Editeurs Indépendants and which allows African publishers to co-edit a text previously published in France. Initially, it was a discussion with Véronique Tadjou, who wrote *L'ombre d'Imana*, a text dealing with the genocide in Rwanda, that started the adventure. The author was concerned that her book, published in France, had nearly no chance to be found and read in Africa. The will to "give back" to the South texts written by African authors and also for an African audience led to the co-publishing of *L'Ombre d'Imana*, and later to the collection "Terres solidaires". Beside the "relocation of culture", the initiative offers answers to various problems

¹³ Ivory Coast is the only francophone country in Africa to organize national tenders. On this question, see Lauwerier, Thibault L'influence de la Banque mondiale sur les politiques d'éducation de base en Afrique de l'Ouest francophone: les cas du Mali et du Sénégal de 1980 à 2010. Thesis defended at the Université of Geneva, 2013.

¹⁴ See <http://www.africanbookscollective.com> (accessed January 2016).

¹⁵ See <http://www.afrilivres.net> (accessed June 2016).

¹⁶ See for example Papyrus edition, a house that published in French, Pulaar, and Wolof (<http://www.loiseauindigo.fr/category/liste-editeurs/editionspapyrus> accessed January 2016)

African publishers have to face through a variety of methods. Amongst these, Terres solidaires offers African readers the possibility to read books by high-profile authors first published in France at a competitive prices, thereby bridging the gap between African writers publishing in the west and their audiences on the African continent.¹⁷ Because the Alliance des Editeurs Indépendants purchases the rights of publication for Africa from the original French publishers, where willing¹⁸, the prices of the re-published book can be adjusted to suit the needs of the African market. For example, titles like *Mandela et moi* or *Loin de mon père* are sold at 2 500 CFA or 4,3 DM (roughly 3 euros¹⁹). Secondly, books published through the Alliance are available in each of its member countries, offering *de facto* an intra-african system of distribution and making the collective's work more visible. For example, *Jazz et vin de palme*, written by Emmanuel Dongala, was distributed in the bookstore of the Algiers airport, while the latest title issued, *La Saison de l'ombre*, by Leonora Miano, will be co-published by eight African publishers and distributed in 18 countries on the continent.

Initiatives of this sort are important not just for the work that they do, but also for the way in which each successful enterprise might serve as a point of inspiration for the creation of further enterprises. For example, François Nkeme, who is the co-founder of the Cameroonian publishing house Ifrikiya, has worked with the Alliance on several co-editions of the collection "Terres solidaires". In 2008, he worked in collaboration with Editions Tropiques to co-publish *Je suis né en prison*²⁰, a collection of short stories written in tribute to Nelson Mandela. Working in cooperation in this context serves as a form of apprenticeship and training in the marketing and distribution of books, as well as a means of cost-sharing through a form of wholesale printing in which each publisher may choose how many copies to pay for from a larger consignment, with the sole constraint being that at least 2000 copies are printed in total. For example, for the co-publishing of *De l'autre côté du regard*, a book written by Ken Bugul and initially published in France by Le Serpent à Plumes, Editions Eburnie (Abidjan, Ivory Coast) purchased 700 copies and Khoudia (Dakar, Senegal) 200. Initiatives like this demonstrate the ways in which, in a global economy, African publishers think and operate in ways which move beyond the local, often using the resources at hand to offset the asymmetrical relationship between Africa and the West in the realm of book production. New means of communication help, mostly for the debate between co-editors, but also – of course – in the transmission of computer files.

Publishing books with profit

¹⁷ The information flows are clearly unequal: while books printed in Africa rarely attract the attention from the Western world, on the other hand, the African literary scene whose books are published in Europe enjoys a wide visibility on the continent: media from the Western world (RFI being the most important for francophone Africa) as well as local journalists are voicing the successes obtained in France or elsewhere, so that most of the people will most likely know about Alain Mabanckou and Leonora Miano than Nafissatou Dia Diouf or Badiadji Horréto. As a consequence, most readers would like to be able to read these famous writers. Members of the Alliance des éditeurs indépendants, if they can propose local writers to be published in co-edition, usually agree easily upon a "big name" published in France but already identified in West-africa. It is more difficult to find a consensus upon a "local" name that won't be able to unite readers in the same way in various African countries.

¹⁸ If rather small independent publishing houses are often willing to take part in such an operation, a major publishing house like Le Seuil for example, is steadily and categorically rejecting this option.

¹⁹ For further details : <http://www.alliance-editeurs.org/+terres-solidaires-+?lang=en> (accessed January 2016)

²⁰ Edmont VII Mballa Elanga (dir.), *Je suis né en prison*. Yaoundé : Editions Ifrikiya/Tropiques, 2008, 205 p. Both publishers are based in Cameroon.

If the development of readerships and markets remains challenging in the African context, it is nonetheless untrue to imagine the African continent merely as a place of ‘book famines’ and wasted potential and it would be wrong to think that the virtuous relationship induced by collective action only goes from Western world to African publishers.

Kamel Daoud’s *Meursault, contre-enquête* originally published in Algeria by Sofiane and Selma Hadjadj, the co-founders of Barzakh,²¹ is one example of the complex and multi-faceted relationship between publishers. Later published in France, the book was eventually translated into English and released in the United States, where it ranked in the top ten of *Publishers Weekly*’s Best Book of 2015. While the American publication of the book was certainly a result of its French release, the case of *Meursault, contre-enquête* nonetheless demonstrates the ways which African publications can and do garner interest from Western readers and publishers. Indeed, the international success of the book led not only to a series of debates around it in Algeria, its original country of publication, but also generated a far greater interest in the book, reflected in record sales figures for fiction of 10,000 copies.

It is important to keep in mind such figures, even if they are somewhat exceptional, because as with every business, the publishers’ trade must be economically viable. In fact, in some countries, popular literature remains an important and successful force. In Côte d’Ivoire, for example, the Nouvelles Éditions Ivoiriennes²² launched a very popular collection of romance novels, Adoras, in 1998. Often referred to as “the African Harlequin” (in reference to the Canadian company Harlequin Enterprises that publish romance paperbacks), the books are nonetheless rooted in West African contexts and attract a large readership, mostly composed of women²³. One of the most successful writer of the collection is Isaïe Biton Koulibaly whose novel, *La parenthèse délicieuse*, sold 3255 copies, while one of his short stories, *Ah ! Les femmes*, 5000 copies in just one month after its release (in 2012). This success is also explained by the fact that Nouvelles Éditions Ivoiriennes is partly owned by Lagardère (Hachette), giving it a firm institutional and structural basis. This statement is particularly true as commercialisation is concerned: all titles are distributed by NEI, Edipress and Edicef (Hachette international), a structure that helps to explain its strong economic position. It also explains why some titles of the Adoras collection are among the very few to be proposed by Amazon (through the Kindle format). At the same time, the local networks of Isaïe Biton Koulibaly are also of importance. In addition to being a journalist in both local and international papers and working at the public radio and television, the author has a strong business acumen, as well as a keen sense of marketing. In the case of Adoras, success thus appears to be the result of both social criteria (stories attuned to the taste of readers and rooted in an African context), economical status and distribution strength of the publisher (closely linked to the ex-colony) and a keen sense of marketing and self-promotion of the author. But as far as popular literature is concerned, other factors can come into play, like the reading habits, that is often boosted

²¹ <http://www.editions-barzakh.com> (accessed January 2016)

²² Founded in 1992 with the agreement of the state, its major investors are Edicef (Hachette) and Edipress (Ivory Coast). NEI has absorbed CEDA (Centrale d’édition et de diffusion africaine) in 2012.

²³ Lydie Moudileno has written much on the subject. See « L’invention du romantisme. La littérature rose révolutionne l’édition africaine » in *Africultures* (15/06/2005). Available online: <http://www.africultures.com/php/?nav=article&no=3816> (accessed June 2016) and, more recently, « The Troubling Popularity of West African Romance Novels » in *Research in African Literature*, vol. 39, n°4, Winter 2008 (Positively Popular: African Culture and the Mainstream), pp. 120-132. Another paper worth to be mentioned is « Ecrire, lire, penser et vivre à partir du continent. Le ‘phénomène Isaïe Biton’ en Côte d’Ivoire ou les dernières lignes d’un champ littéraire national » by David K. N’goran in Abdoulaye Imorou, Bernard De Meyer, Philip Awezaye (eds), *Ecrire et publier en Afrique francophone. Enjeux et perspectives*. French Studies in Southern Africa n°44.2 – 2014, pp. 168-189.

by the facts that in some countries, books are also written in national languages. It is the case, for example, in Tanzania and Nigeria²⁴.

In Tanzania, where a truly popular literature, brewed in crimes and passion novels, has developed and attracts a lot of readers since long, a new turn has been taken with an author like Eric Shigongo, one of the latest and most prolific writers at that time. Just as Isaïe Biton Koulibaly, Shigongo has strong connections with journalism, as he is the owner and chief executive officer of Global Publishers, a company he co-founded in 1998 with his partner Abdallah Mrisho Salawi. Since the 1990s, Tanzania has experimented the privatization of media, giving rise to a multiplication of newspapers and also to new ways of publishing: writing in newspaper is, in fact, one of the most popular form of writing nowadays, allowing writers to reach a greater number of readers and playing a major role – as before in Europe or elsewhere – in the constitution of communities of readers. As reported by Uta Reuster-Jahn, in Tanzania, newspapers print-runs reach between 45 000 and 60 000 copies for an average of 250 000 readers each²⁵. Being a powerful medium, newspaper is often a good option for writers who publish in “feuilleton” before issuing books. In Shigongo’s case, this strategy proved incredibly successful. Writing serials published in the newspapers of his own media company, his texts are widely read, as these are distributed in the whole country. As the author enjoys a page for his books on the website of *Global Publishers*, he can exchange extensively with readers and gain an informed opinion about their tastes and the reception of his texts.²⁶ Afterwards, he can choose which serials can be turned into books. Thus far, this has been the case for three of them: *The Last days of my Life (Siku za mwisho wa Uhai wangu)*; *The President Loves my Wife (Rais anampenda Mke wangu)* and *Blood and Tears (Damu na Machozi)*,²⁷ all of which, despite their titles, are written predominantly in Kiswahili and feature a strong combination of romance, suspense, crime and passion. In a conversation with Uta Reuster-Jahn, Shigongo himself puts the figure of 120 000 copies sold for the *The Last Days of My Life* and *The President Loves my Wife*. This huge figure, even if somewhat inflated, is an indicator of how new digital strategies can achieve success. In Shigongo’s case, the reasons are many:

- a well-established strategy: visually, books of a high quality whose size and style strongly remind the reader of international best-sellers;
- a nationwide distribution as he uses his sale representatives for his book as well as his newspapers;
- at the same time, books are also clearly advertised in the newspapers and on the *Global Publishers*’ website;

²⁴ In Tanzania, most books are published in Kiswahili, and even if the reading of Swahili classics remains for most Tanzanians rather confined to the school time, detective and crime stories are numerous and quite successful. In Nigeria, even if most of the production is written in English, Yoruba literature is quite dynamic, with such authors as David O. Fagunwa, I.B. Akinyele, Akinwumi Isola, Akinlade Kola and, more recently Akinlabi Banjo. There is also a tradition of translation between English and Yoruba, Soyinka’s works being translated in Yoruba by Akinwumi Isola and Soyinka himself translating into English Fagunwa’s works (see *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* and *In the Forest of Olodumare*). To have a glimpse on Yoruba literature, see <http://www.sunshinenigeria.com/yoruba> (accessed June 2016). I am indebted to George Alao for this online reference.

²⁵ Uta Reuster-Jahn, *The newspaper serials in Tanzania : the case of Eric Shigongo*. Swahili Forum 15 (2008), p. 25-50. The paper can be read online : http://www.qucosa.de/fileadmin/data/qucosa/documents/9104/15_04_Reuster-Jahn.pdf (accessed January 2016).

²⁶ See tab “hadithi” (stories in Kiswahili) of the Global Publishers website (<http://globalpublishers.co.tz> accessed January 2016). The website itself, full with adverts (and widely advertising Shigongo’s novels) is an excellent example of new marketing strategies.

²⁷ *The Last days of my Life* is out of print, *The President Loves my Wife* has been published in 2003 and *Damu na Machozi* in 2005.

- printed in India, the book are affordable for Tanzanian as the price is about 4000 ShT (namely around 2,50 euros).

These endeavors raise questions around what ‘independent’ means in a context in which support from metropolitan publishing houses, advertisement and patronage remains essential. Nonetheless, they give hope that related marketing and distribution structures may be developed by and for small and more demanding publishing houses such as Ankara Press/Cassava Republic Press. At the same time, these endeavours also indicate both the extent to which a real market for reading continues to exist in Africa and the importance of new media in capturing this market. Based on these brief examples, a series of conclusions can be drawn.

First, popular literature is deeply shaped by writers very much aware of global trends, as well as marketing. They adapt to an African market where social issues are important and distinct from those of the Western world²⁸. Second, they use diverse media to reach a greater audience, mastering the new possibilities that technology offers and taking advantage of a strategy where the written word travels from newspaper to blog and cinema. Most of these strategies may be used by publishers, even if they are not working on the same kind of publications.

African publishers : New tools for the future ?

Major upheavals in history have been generated by the emergence of a new medium: after the invention of the press (and Victor Hugo writing that book was to replace the cathedral), is digital publishing ready to take over paper edition in Africa? It is easy to become overly optimistic when considering the possibilities produced by new technology in Africa, where they remain unevenly distributed. Some cities like Nairobi, Cape Town and Dar es Salaam are highly connected, as are many capitals in francophone Africa. Yet, when one gets out of the town and into rural areas, the situation changes; in some countries like DRC and South Sudan, internet access can be rare, even in major cities²⁹. At the same time, mobile phones remain prevalent across the continent. Despite concerns around uneven access, digital technologies have become an increasingly important tool for African publishers, one which more and more are experimenting with.³⁰ It is easy to see why: digital publishing offers solutions to two of the major problems which face print publishing, namely cost and distribution.

New reading habits are also developing in Africa, especially amongst children, driven by the provision by some NGOs of Amazon Kindles and other tablets. *Worldreader*, an American NGO, claimed through its website to have distributed 7395 tablets (and a total of 1.2 million digital books).³¹ The NGO has also developed a Worldreader Mobile application that will provide access to digital library through an

²⁸ The role of women, gender questions are much debated, through various point of view. For example, the most successful book by Ifrikiya is *Walaandé*, written by a fula woman from Cameroon on the issue of polygamy. 5000 copies of the book has been sold in Cameroon in five years. Djaili Amadou Amal, *Walaandé, l'art de partager un mari*. Yaoundé : Ifrikiya, 2010.

²⁹ In 2012, Radio Okapi reported that less than 1% of the population in DRC had access to Internet (see: <http://www.radiookapi.net/economie/2012/11/09/rdc-moins-de-1-de-la-population-seulement-acces-internet>. Accessed June 2016).

³⁰ For example, in a recent interview, François Nkeme who founded Proximité (Cameroon) mentioned that smartphones, tablets, and laptops were less expensive now, so it was important to take account of these new media. (unpublished personal exchange with François Nkeme, 24/03/2016).

³¹ <http://www.worldreader.org> (accessed January 2016).

ordinary mobile phone. In Europe, Foundation Orange is also developing projects for Africa³². If this news is rather good for readers, it also underlines how important it is for African publishers to think about the new possibilities offered by technology, especially given the risk, should such projects be left to Western companies and NGOs, of ongoing extraversion. African publishers are nowadays quite aware of the importance of mastering these new media. For the moment, their main interest is to use the great visibility allowed by Internet. Publishers from Anglophone Africa are already quite used to having their own websites, and structures like *Kwani?* or *Writivism*, among others, have succeeded to give visibility to literary creation thanks to their presence on the web³³. This is not yet always the case of publishing houses from francophone Africa. To improve the situation, the Alliance Lab organized a workshop in Dakar in June 2015 to train publishers of francophone Africa on web technologies to help with the marketing of their publications. This is a first step, and a few editors (Le Fennec éditions ; Editions Amalion ; ...) now have websites allowing people to order or buy online.

The most significant action in francophone Africa is undoubtedly the creation, in 2006, of the Nouvelles éditions numériques africaines (NENA) followed, in 2013, by the Librairie numérique africaine.³⁴ Most recently, the emergence of Kusoma³⁵, a Senegalese-based platform which works as an online publisher, bookshop and library underlines how people from the editing world in Africa have grasped the capital importance of “turning digital”. NENA, founded by Marc-André Ledoux, works with different African publishers, mostly, but not exclusively, from Senegal, as a Dakar-based institution, and propose a catalogue of more than 400 books in Epub format. You can order digital books ranging from those by well-known authors (Henri Lopes, Francis Bebey) to those by young author like Mutt-Lon, noted for his novel *Ceux qui sortent la nuit*³⁶ or the above mentioned Isaïe Biton Koulibaly, directly, using a user-friendly interface and benefiting from affordable prices (around 2500 CFA for a book in Epub format, i.e, slightly less than four euros). Marc-André Leroux says that more and more authors and publishing houses are willing to work in partnership with NENA³⁷. He also states that digital publishing is in no way an opponent to paper publishing. On the contrary, and as we have already seen in Eric Shigongo’s case, one format can find its own public and lead to the other. In fact, it may be important to take into account that texts are gaining strength when adapted to various formats including newspaper, books, movies, digital and also audiobooks.

While paperbooks have never truly found a place in the daily life of most Africans, new opportunities are emerging as texts are gradually getting more and more separated from printed materials. In Europe, more and more teenagers read online³⁸, and one may think that in Africa, where printed books are less

³² For further informations : Matthieu Joulin et Octavio Kulesz, « Le don de livres numériques : quelles logiques et quels enjeux ? » in *Takam Tikou*, 2015 available online : <http://takamtikou.bnf.fr/dossiers/dossier-2015-culture-num-rique-la-biblioth-que-enrichie/le-don-de-livres-num-riques-queelles> (accessed January 2016).

³³ See <https://writivism.org/> and <http://www.kwani.org> for all the events, festivals, projects fostered by these structures.

³⁴ <http://librairienumeriqueafricaine.com/> (accessed January 2016).

³⁵ For further informations : <http://www.kusoma-group.com/fr/editions-kusoma> (accessed June 2016).

³⁶ Mutt-Lon, *Ceux qui sortent la nuit*, Paris : Grasset, 2013. The novel was awarded the Kourouma Prize in 2014. His latest book, *La Procession des Charognards*, has been published in Cameroun by CLE and is available in Epub format thanks to the platform.

³⁷ Marc-André Ledoux, interview with Octavio Kulesz, Alliance Lab, 14 may, 2015. Available online: <http://alliance-lab.org/archives/2611?lang=fr#.V1cg2vmLTIU> (accessed may 2016).

³⁸ As for the French case, see the CNL report “les Français et la lecture” (2015), available online: http://www.centrenationaldulivre.fr/fr/actualites/aid-666/les_francais_et_la_lecture (accessed June 2016).

common than cell-phones, the same is on its way. So that if African publishers manage to surmount the difficulties (little experience, exposure to piracy), the future looks promising.

Publishing in Africa... in African languages?

But of course technology does not stand for everything. Equally important is the task of making voices – and different voices – heard. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o wrote in *Decolonizing the mind*, it is also important to propose one’s ideas through African languages. Not only because it strengthens the language in itself (that can thus gain also more readers) but because every language also encapsulates a specific worldview that has a right to take part in the intellectual debates. It has become more commonplace in the twenty-first century to view languages like English, French, Portuguese and Spanish as African languages. These languages have been part of national culture for many decades now, often hold national status and are often the language of instruction in educational institutions. At the same time, these languages have not been passively accepted by African populations; rather, they have been subject to a process of adaptation, where specifically African forms of each language have developed across the continent. But African is also rich with an incredible number of indigenous languages, sharing very different situations in terms of number of speakers and status. If it would be sheer utopia to think that all these languages will someday become standard languages for publishing, it is nonetheless important to consider the current situation, given the opportunities provided by new technologies. Historically, indigenous languages have been hampered by the lack of standardization in orthography, leading to a situation where languages easily spoken were not so easily written or read. These facts are still very true today but slowly new projects are emerging, both with respect to well-established African languages such as Kiswahili, with its long history as a written language, and in smaller ones, like fe’efe’e. Significantly, computer technologies make it possible to write in every language: Unicode, for example, with its 110 000 characters may be used to transcribe more than one hundred languages.³⁹ If you work with a Mac, you can set up more than eighty languages on your computer, and with an iPhone, these figures go up to more than two hundred. Of course, the potential to write in a language is not the same thing as publishing in a language, but it is still important to keep in mind that more than once, changes have come only after the development by tools. Indeed, a current example today comes from Aline-Léonie Chouapi, who is translating Patrice Nganang’s book, *Mont Plaisant*, into fe’efe’e, a bamileke language, using Clafrica software, a literal manifestation of Ngugi’s plea that, for African languages to develop, they must be put into use and enriched through the engagement of a writer or translator who decides to work in African languages.

Publishing in African languages would not be the only solution to the problems plaguing African publishers and, indeed, a series of serious challenges remain in the project of indigenous publishing. At the same time, work is being done in this regard and it is often writers who take a central role in this process. Along with Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop is another public intellectual who stands as an example and whose experience of publishing *Doomi Golo* in Wolof has led him to think about the relative potentials and pitfalls of writing in his mother tongue⁴⁰. New

³⁹ Conference presentation by Huguette Rigot, International Workshop “Enseigner les littératures en langues “minorées” : Politique, outils et pratique”, Paris: INALCO, 23-24 September, 2015.

⁴⁰ Diop has said and written much on the subject. For a brief bibliography and further information, see my contribution “Between mother tongue and ‘ceremonial tongue’: Boubacar Boris Diop and the self-translation of *Doomi Golo*” in *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, vol. 18, n°1, 2015, pp. 101-114.

technologies diversify the options available to writers and publishers, and a growing interest has emerged from the African publishers themselves. The first edition of the SAELLA (Salon de l'Écrit et du Livre en Langues Africaines) that took place in Bamako (Mali) in 2016⁴¹ is a prime example. For three days, professionals, academics, institutions and NGO exchanged ideas and debated on publishing in African languages in a clear sign that the question remains vital. Two panels dedicated to “African languages and communication technologies” also took a specific interest in digital issues. Finally, the birth of “Ceytu”, a collection edited by Boubacar Boris Diop which aims to publish major works of francophone literature in Wolof translation⁴² is another example of the ways in which indigenous languages are operating in the landscape of publishing. Significantly, Ceytu’s co-publishers, Zulma and Mémoire d’encrier, are Canada and France-based, signaling that “imagined communities” in our contemporary world are perhaps less and less related to nation-state. It enhances how a “local” language can go “global” thanks to networks and the fact that, as Bernard Mouralis puts it: “Désormais, ce qui compte, en matière d’écriture et d’édition, c’est la connexion bien plus que la localisation, qui peut s’avérer bien difficile à repérer.”⁴³ Equally, translation plays a role in the possibilities of dialogue and the development of larger communities, as numerous examples from the African continent make plain. It is interesting to note that François Nkeme, from the late Ifrikiya, has sold the rights of *Walaandé* to three coeditors (Med Ali, Tunisia; Dar-al Farabi and Al Intishar in Lebanon). The book has been translated in Arabic and will gain more readers in countries where polygamy is also an important issue to debate. A proof that African publishers themselves are expanding their horizon and take part, through their publications, to a more global debate even if, from a Western point of view, it can go undetected.

The publishing industry has always had a major role to play in the defence of diversity at local and global scales. In Africa, publishers still have to fight against serious competition from their Western counterparts, where the textbook battle remains the most important – and challenging – part of the job, not only economically but also symbolically as education plays a key role in shaping dominant views and values. If literary publishers in Africa have proven that it is possible to publish successfully on the continent, this sometimes occurred through the use of strategies and patterns for marketing and production developed elsewhere. New technologies seem to offer a real opportunity for publishing in Africa, but will that lead to more diversity or, on the contrary, a reign of global standardization? The question is still open.

Nathalie Carré

⁴¹ SAELLA, Salon de l'Écrit et du Livre en Langues Africaines. Bamako : January 20-23, 2016.

⁴² Three major writers – Césaire, Le Clézio and Mariama Bâ – have thus already been translated and published.

⁴³ Bernard Mouralis, “Écrire et publier en Afrique : (re)localisation, postcolonial, mondialisation” in Awezaye, Imorou, et de Meyer (eds) *Écrire et publier en Afrique francophone. Enjeux et perspectives*, French Studies in Southern Africa, n° 44-2-2014, p. 24..