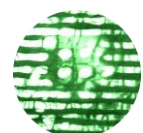


Abstract

African Development” as a concept, is not generally construed to incorporate “the literary”. By now a self-sustaining industry, “African Development” is composed of economic, political, and social factors: [...]. However, within a less-restrictive construction of “development” it can be argued that, among the cadres who function as “African Development Agents,” working “in the field” as well as in the theoretical realm, belong African creative writers-novelists, poets, playwrights.” This insightful remark by Anne Adams and Janis Mayes (1998: 2) touches the essential issue of agency that upholds African writing although this kind of intervention is not easily transferrable into ‘material culture’.

The observation pinpoints Europhone literature but the question has even more weight for Afrophone literature that in many cases still fights for notice. This paper shows the potential Afrophone literature has in operating as a cultural ‘transformative space’ boiling down to literature for development with regard to literary activities, access to literature, readers’ ‘horizons of expectations’ and writers/readers’ interaction. The paper builds on an innovative and ‘locogenetic’ (Ogundipe 1993) literary café in Dar es Salaam that reconciles curriculum reading with reading for leisure. A major asset of this literary café is that it is a brainchild of a publishing company led by two Tanzanian women writers and cultural practitioners who strive for development ‘from below’ and development with a ‘cultural face’, which explains the publishing’s house interest in market research that shall herald the publication of culturally relevant books.

Keywords: bottom-up development, cultural agency, mediation of afrophone literature



Introduction

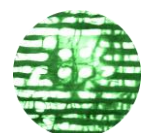
In *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) insisted on the need to differentiate between 'Afro-European' literature that is literature written by African in European languages and 'Afrophone' literature or literature written in African languages. Moreover, he invited African writers to resort to African languages because.

The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. (Ngugi, 1986, 4)

This comment embodies the question of African language literatures as a means for knowing the self and determining strategies for self-development, national-development and positioning the self in the world, which explains the interest in a 'locogenetic' approach to development. By locogenetic attitude, Ogundipe (1998, 27) means strategies 'developed by its users, conceived by the people who need the development'. The peculiarity of the book café that forms the core of the paper is that it responds to the needs of the field, which is why I regard it as an alternative cultural development agency that arouse from the fact that its initiators have a sounding knowledge of the ethnography of the book chain in Tanzania.

By ethnography of the book chain, it is understood all steps through which a book passes from its inception through technical editing until publication, circulation and reception. The two female cultural experts Demere Kitunga and Elieshi Lema worked respectively for the Dar es Salaam University Press and the Tanzanian publishing house, which means that they gathered experience within state-sponsored publishing houses before deciding to take on them the challenge to start this cultural business. It is worth stressing the cultural nature of their business because both cultural practitioners do not merely see the profit in terms of direct returns on investment but more in terms of future emancipation through reading quality books and being part of a conducive environment that will allow young people -future readers-leaders-thinkers- to see the wealth in books especially books written in a language that speaks to them: Swahili.

This paper seeks to show that the mediation of Afrophone literature as undertaken by the book café SOMA reinforces the potential of African languages literature to operate as an alternative cultural development agency with the features of a 'transformative space' boiling down to literature for development. Literature for development encompasses in the case study questions of access to literature, literary activities, readers' 'horizons of expectations' and writers/readers' interaction. Thus, mediation is understood here as setting up a space for curriculum reading but especially reading for leisure, knowledge constitution, knowledge acquirement, exchange of information and knowledge transfer which all pertain to development.



Theoretical premises that support the essay are on the side of literary analyses Fish's (1976) 'interpretive communities' that go along with Bourdieu's (1992) 'literary field' and Meizoz (2007) 'collective creation/plural authorship'. On the side of development discourses, I take up the bottom-up development paradigm (Ekin & Max-Neef, 1992) that is supported by a locogenetic approach which highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in any form of development agency.

The argument will be developed around three sections. The first part touches the background of the publishing house that initiated the book café as its brainchild in response to the problem of the reading culture in Tanzania. The second section explains the choice of theoretical inputs. The third part delves into SOMA's activities with regard to its promotion of Swahili literature as an agent of self-development and national development.

I. Background of E&D¹ Limited

E&D Limited and Mkuki na Nyota publishers run by Walter Bgoya (former manager of the Tanzania Publishing House) are currently the two renowned independent publishing houses in Tanzania. They were launched by cultural experts aware of the Tanzanian book chain in response to the collapse of the Tanzania Publishing house which caused the scarcity of books over a long period of time. This explains why E&D is introduced as follows on the website:

E&D Vision Publishing is a development publisher, and by this we mean that the driving force of the publishing process in E&D is the commitment to avail information and knowledge to people in a society that needs information and knowledge, within a global context, where more than ever before, information and knowledge is power. E and D Editorial Services and Publishing Consultancy is a development publishing Organization with two interrelated subsidiaries: E and D Vision Publishing Limited which handles the commercial publishing mandate; and E and D Readership and Development Agency which handles the development mandate, through a hub of activities run in the Soma Book Café hosting the Soma Bookshop. This set up, with related functions recognizes the market principle of the interdependence between spending and earning, and takes note of the reality that if Tanzanian society does not nurture readers and book buyers, publishing as an industry will not thrive.

The idea of knowledge as power stresses the need to develop mechanisms that lift the reading culture. E&D recognized the problem of reading culture in Tanzania. Factors that hold back the reading culture in Tanzania are among others the attitude of reading only for exams, the low buying power², the prominence of guidebooks that distract from the original

¹ E&D stands for Elieshi and Demere who are the two cultural experts at the heart of the project.

² In 2012 the World Bank estimated the per capita income for Tanzania to be USD 609.



material, the growing dominion of electronic media, book circulation, the lack of appropriate environments for stimulating reading and thereof the lack of activities promoting reading and especially the aesthetic gap between texts and audiences. Mulokozi (1999, 26) unveils this discrepancy in the following statement:

The problem of readership, therefore, has nothing to do with lack of potential readers; rather, it boils down to questions of relevance, accessibility, pricing (vis-à-vis the average income of the targeted audience), and book promotion and distribution generally.

Relevance here is understood in terms of content, form, utility, interest and level of discernment whereas accessibility points to the lack of book channels such as public libraries, bookshops/local and regional book distributors³ especially the infrastructural challenges that make it difficult for books to reach detached audiences located in districts and rural areas. As far as pricing is concerned, the main problem is that the cost of publishing makes books too expensive for the customary reader in an environment where there are urgent existential needs. The exception is with books that are in school curricula because their production bestows a basic rule: the higher the print run, the more affordable the price is. To this affordable price shall be added some grants for example from the Canadian Organization for Development through Education⁴ in Tanzania.

E&D has critically engaged with the broad range of factors that restrain readership in Tanzania, which explains the fact that the book café reacts to the needs of the field by offering the space for experiencing reading as a group activity and by dedicating time to conduct readership survey so that the communication between texts and audiences can be strengthened and appropriately documented. The issue of texts and audiences is central for books published in Kiswahili because beyond the fact that there is a fast growing number of titles in Kiswahili, it is necessary to consider Altbach's (1999, 6) ⁵ submission that:

Economic power is concentrated in the hands of people who are literate in a European language, and thus preference is often given to these languages. This is true for reasons of prestige and also because there is a much wider choice of materials to buy.

³ Henry Chakava (1996, 61) rightly calls book marketing and distribution the Achille Heels of publishing in Africa.

⁴ Between 1996 and 2001, for example, the CODE requested publishers of a manuscript to print at least 7000 copies from which the organization bought 5000 that were distributed in schools in Tanzania. This left publishers with 2000 copies to run, but definitely with less economic constraints because almost a third had already been sold. This salutary initiative also has the problem of rendering the publishing industry into a donor depending sector. (Mulokozi *ibid*, 24).

⁵ In the introductory section of his article, Altbach points out that most books published in Africa are in French, English and Portuguese, not in African languages.



Often, buyers who are literate in more than one language will prefer to buy European language books rather than local indigenous language publications, even if the local materials are less expensive. Lack of purchasing power is a central problem for indigenous language publishing: without a market, it is not possible to publish books. But if no books are available in these languages, the market will not emerge because readers will have no choices.

Kiswahili titles occupy a prominent position on the Tanzanian bookmarket thanks to the language policy that privileged Kiswahili over English since the sixties. However, one should acknowledge that the number of English titles stretches due to the internationalisation of curricula especially in private schools which are mushrooming in Tanzanian cities. The challenge in Tanzania is more to identify the audiences' expectations and to cultivate the habit of reading with regard to Swahili literature as a potential agent of cultural development. The question of development leads into the second part which addresses the theoretical backgrounds on which the paper is grounded.

II. Theoretical premises

Here, I bring together literary premises and an approach from development discourses. Regarding literature, Fish (1976) 'interpretive communities' transcends reading as an individual exercise and foresees conditions such as economic power, exposure to literary material and the presence of institutions that foster (collective) reading and personal growth. In this case study focusing on reading taking place beyond the institutional curriculum agenda, the notion 'interpretive community' is contextualized since people of different backgrounds are brought together and given the space for reading together, exchanging their views on literature and occasionally with authors and even make recommendations regarding their 'horizon of expectation' (Jauss, 1987). To Jauss, a piece of literary work is complete when the triangle author-work-audience is at play.

In having a collective experience of literature, people who participate in Soma's activities act on the 'literary field' (Bourdieu, 1992) and are involved in the process that Meizoz (2007) refers to as 'collective creation/plural authorship'.

Meizoz and Bourdieu share the view that literature is a cultural pursuit that requires the active implication of participants such as writers in the given literary landscape, editors, publishers, typographers, graphic designers, readers, critics, teachers, institutions (sponsorships, awards, patronages), academic and non-academic journals, media, libraries, administrative and political authorities, etc. These actors use their cultural, economic, social or symbolic capital to shape the production and reception of literary works. The question of capital whether economical, cultural, material etc is central to development premises.

As far as development discourse is concerned I build on the bottom-up development paradigm as explored in Ekin & Max-Neef (1992). This approach encourages development enterprises that are self-reliant, endogenous, need-oriented and which favor local participation. The book café Soma echoes these principles in the sense that it runs against the



backdrop of the ‘cargo cult’ mentality to which many people in less favored countries still cling. Iijima (1998, 179) notes that:

‘The cargo cult’ is understood to be a combination of Messianism from Christianity and traditional religious belief that the dead (ancestors) would bring ‘Cargo’ (for example, food) to this world. People in Melanesia were very attracted to the materialistic aspect of the Western missions and colonialism, and ‘Cargo Cult’ became a popular religious movement in the first half of the twentieth century. They worshipped and were traditionally dependent on the ‘big men’, often equivalent to God, and their gifts.

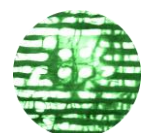
By refusing to wait for the sky and philanthropists to shower them with donations and to take actions that address local issues, the book café amounts to what Ogundipe (1998) calls ‘locogenetic’ development that is development that is culturally sensitive, ‘demand-driven’ and not directed by donors’ agendas. Since literature is generally lost count of when talking of development, at this point it is necessary to provide a thought that well articulates the link between literature and development. To Palmer (1998, 37-38):

Literature can have a formidable impact on any people’s development, though it’s an impact that cannot be quantified in the terms to which people have become accustomed. It cannot be converted into money in the bank, or directly related to the increase in a people’s health standards, or an increase in the productivity of rice. But it can affect people’s lives for the better in all sorts of subtle ways. Wherever there are people, literature will also emerge as an expression of their values, their views of the life they live and their aspirations about the kind of life they would like to live. [...] If literature is about life, it must surely have a bearing on strategies which are intended to improve the quality of that life, which is really what development is all about.

Palmer’s citation illustrates the point that literature is actually geared towards progress since it is concerned with the permanent quest for betterment, hence, development. After having provided the reader with the background of the publishing house which created the conditions for the birth of the book café and situated the paper within theoretical debates on development, I now turn to a close look at cultural developmental activities run at the book café Soma. Soma pursues investment in culture and puts a repeated emphasis on local participation. The attention devoted to local outputs renders the book café to an agent of intra-cultural awareness which is the precondition for intercultural communication.

III. Cultural activities at Soma

In my opinion the book café Soma is a ‘cultural infrastructure’ that shows the most up-to-date Tanzanian locogenetic approach to afrophone literature as a foundation of development. The *modus operandi* gives weight to the fact that a reading culture owns to mechanisms of books’ production and audiences’ surveys. An artistic translation of the



swahili word SOMA which means ‘to read’ is *Roads to Reading*⁶ or ‘Room to Read’ which joins the idea of the San Francisco based NGO that sets to promote the culture of reading in emerging countries.

SOMA is an interface between readership’s expectations, production, mediation and reception of literary works in a context of unacquired readership. The following is a sign post at the entrance of Soma Book Café, with E&D Readership and Development Agency- Soma logo.

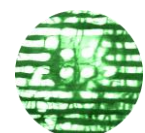


Figure 1. SOMA BOOK CAFÉ: Leisure, Culture and Learning

Soma was launched in June 2008. It acts as a platform between a publishing house and audiences. SOMA tries to promote readership, to make literature accessible to a wide audience, to develop cooperation among literacy organisations, to figure out levels, types and interest of readers and categories of books read⁷. The assumption is that such feedback will help the publisher to consider and encourage manuscripts that better echo readers’ demands. This research on readership is conducted in a pleasing and green environment in which

⁶Roads to Reading is the engaging title of Staiger’s book (1979).

⁷ Altbach (1999, 9-10) recommended four ‘central elements’ that may support publishing in African languages: economic viability, marketing and market research, regional markets and language research and development. In the same vein, Mulokozi (1999, 19) advocates “literature-promotion activities, such as writings clubs and school magazines including wall magazines”.



readers of various ages are provided with facilities such as a bookshop⁸, stalls for reading and working, internet access and a coffee shop.

This cultural centre also has an economic outreach that is worth being mentioned. It has generated some long-term job opportunities and revenues to a few professional and administrative personnel as well as to several culture professionals and artists who are associated to short-term projects. In this regard, SOMA has evidenced that «cultural goods and services often need low capital investment by building on materials and skills available within the community». (Unesco, 2010, 5).

SOMA has been running a number of wide audience activities such as a weekly youth forum, a meet the writer forum, a chess club, poetry nights, a weekly children workgroup, literary contests and special events. These activities show that SOMA did a diagnosis of the literary situation in Tanzania and wants to fill in some gap on the literary scene. An added value to these events is their preparation and running in cooperation with university lecturers, teachers in primary and secondary schools, educationalists and the media. Furthermore, SOMA puts efforts in collecting and circulating artistic information. To this end, the SOMA literary magazine that appears on a quarterly basis came to existence in January 2009.

Under the motto ‘we celebrate the creative word’, the magazine⁹ with contributions in Kiswahili that are summarised in English features among others: a lead, authors’ profiles, book trade, news from the café and announcements of future events, book reviews¹⁰, literary and art news, a literary palaver, a literary feast, policy facts, women and literature section and guides for writing and reading. Except for the lead and the author’s profile, contributions to the magazine do not exceed a page.

With regard to the notion of development from below that insists on participation, self-reliance, need-oriented and endogenous initiatives, Soma has identified five main strategic objectives in order to contribute to development through texts written in Swahili:

1. To establish readership status in the country (so as to generate information and data for policy advocacy and development of effective strategies to change the status quo).

⁸ So far titles available in the bookshop are in English and Kiswahili. It should be noted that books from other publishing houses are also displayed at SOMA.

⁹ Readers’ enthusiastic comments on the magazine are a testimony to its uniqueness.

¹⁰ The section on book reviews fills in a major gap in the Tanzanian literary scene because of the strong ties between reading culture and review culture.



2. To promote the culture of ‘reading’ in the country (and all aspects that stimulate reading for aesthetical pleasure, authoring of ideas and voluntary, independent and sustained pursuit of knowledge).
3. To popularise information on books and readership (so as to enhance access both in terms of informing the public what is available to read and where, and repackaging relevant and strategic knowledge and information into forms that are more accessible, leisurely and aesthetically appealing).
4. To establish a network and alliances among readership advocates (so as to give right to information and knowledge a louder and effective voice and champions).
5. To contribute to capacity development in literary expression and publishing among children and youth (so as to make their voices heard and contribution in the body of literature meant for their consumption felt and validate their creative potentials).

I had through participative observation the chance to put to test these genuinely formulated goals during a field trip in Dar es Salaam. The eagerness of adults after a forum with a writer and pupils’ happiness after a collective reading and a literary competition between two classes from two secondary schools in Dar es Salaam reinforced the conjecture that texts in an African language can boost self-consciousness and group-consciousness. This psychological predisposition oils the wheels of knowledge acquisition and empowerment. Talking of capacity building I will paraphrase a motto by Kwame Nkrumah to point to the affective but effective nature of the book café: ‘let’s prefer self-empowerment with danger to acculturation’¹¹.

The long-term result of this process may be the cultural awareness that African languages literatures can contribute to cultural development. Thus, Soma is primarily future-oriented, which explains the prominence of literary activities for the youth. At SOMA, youngsters are given the space for reading and testing their creative potential. In this sense, SOMA promotes cultural capital by putting as the disposal of young people appropriate conditions for playing the dual role of ‘value-carrier’ and ‘value-creator’. At this point, I end the section by remembering of a substantial popular slogan: “a reader today, a leader tomorrow”.

Conclusion

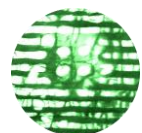
E&D Vision Publishing Limited recognised the missing link between books and audiences and set in motion the book café SOMA that strives to overcome this vacuity by envisioning an ethnography of book production, mediation and reception. In providing the setting for having a participative engagement with literature in Swahili, the cultural experts Demere Kitunga and Elieshi Lema emancipate people especially the youth through literature and suggest alternative action to “so called Western experts who pretend to know more about

¹¹ Nkrumah’s (1957, 94) motto was: “We prefer self-government with danger to servitude in tranquility”.



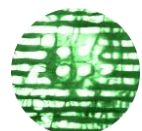
what is good for Africa than Africans themselves” (Ogundipe, 1998, 37). By focusing on discussion of texts written in Swahili they encourage oral competence and literacy in an African language to which most participants easily relate.

From the language ecological point of view, the book café also contributes to cultural heritage and language sustainability by facilitating access to texts in an African language and by supporting reading as a collective experience. The issue of language sustainability is crucial considering the number of African languages that have not yet been written down and particularly those that are dying out. Ultimately, both field experts target development with a cultural face and development tied to literacy in an African language. The outreach of such an endeavour is summarised by *Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General* in one of his speeches (unesco.org) when he notes that “literacy unlocks the door to learning throughout life, is essential to development and health, and opens the way for democratic participation and active citizenship.”



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