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Ugandan Literature: the Questions of Identity, Voice and Context

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Abstract

In this article, the authors attempt to describe the character of the Ugandan book focusing especially on the ways the literature is impacted and or impacts the country's identity, voice, and future. Sometimes, common themes that appear in the literature have come to crystalize national identity in spite of the complex issues generated by years of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Today more than before more Ugandans are able to read. The challenge, however, is that this readership seems to have conspired with the book publishing industry who thrive as business enterprises at the expense of building a national identity and voice, literary health, or cultural heritage. Where then and how can the critical voices grow or multiply? What contexts will grow the Ugandan book? How insoluble are the indigenous publishers? On the other hand, the book chain has been boosted by efforts some of them international like the literary awards and prizes, residences and book fairs. Hitherto ignored constituents like the women and indigenous publishers are also now on board. It is hoped these budding efforts will continue to grow, flourish, and consolidate the Ugandan book character.

Keywords: Uganda, book industry, literature, publishing, national identity

1. Introduction

Literature is generally understood as simply a form of art, but for many writers and readers, literature is also a cultural and socio-political vanguard in a nation's identity quest. When examining the early stages of post-colonial literatures, common questions and fears arise in relation to a nation's identity. Whether it is Canada, Australia, India, or post-colonial countries in Asia or in Africa, some of the recurring questions seem to be: who are we writing for? What is the writing material of our literature? Do we take our national literature as seriously as foreign literature? Do we have "a voice"? How can we encourage, defend and protect this voice? Should writers carry the burden of being voices of their communities?

Let us take the example of the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood who, in her first critical volume, published in 1972, embarked on an attempt to define the "Canadian voice" – one which she claimed was marked by the concept of "survival" (Note 1). However, Atwood later moved beyond the questions of Canadian identity and voice and addressed the question of literary creation in more universal terms – mainly in *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002). Did the topic of a nation's voice no longer interest her? Had Canadian literature moved beyond the need to prove its existence? Had the battle finally been won, with school and university curriculums moving toward featuring Canadian literature instead of American or British literature? Had Canadian readers themselves moved beyond their inferiority complex (Note 2)? Was the international world of letters finally rewarding Canada for its outstanding achievements?

One may question the need to characterize a nation's voice and to push for national and international recognition. While characterizing a nation's voice may seem to be a nearly-impossible task, and at times a reductive process, is it not, nonetheless, a necessary process? Is it not the very process by which more attention is paid to emerging voices and recognition, praises and awards are legitimately obtained?

The fixation with national identity has been a main drive in "subaltern studies" and critics often state that the subject of national identity is essential not only for national pride but also for the establishment of a stable nation in the aftermath of decolonization. Starting with Frantz Fanon's influential work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961, *Les damnés de la terre*), which who believes in the necessary role of violence for the colonized to gain independence, postcolonial literature and criticism moves beyond defending human rights issues and focuses on the affirmation of distinct cultures. What is at stake is to achieve a cultural affirmation which is not limited to the liberation process but which has a "soul" or essence beyond

the ex-colonized status.

For African countries, the process of characterizing a nation's voice is an even more complex process than it was for Canada since it has led critics to bundle up all African nations together and bring the many literatures of a whole continent under one single umbrella, labelled "African writing". Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her Ted talk entitled "The Single Story" expressed her annoyance at hearing people speak of "Africa", as if it were one unique country. It is even more upsetting to hear "African literature" described in the broad caricatured terms such as: "a riot of exhausted clichés even as ancient conflicts and anxieties fade into the past tense: Huts, moons, rapes, wars, and poverty" (Ikheloa March 2012).

Should the recurring questions of post-colonial literatures (concerning specificity, voice, readership and value) therefore be dismissed? At the Hay Festival in November 2011, author and panelist Tarun Tejpal stated: "There is an impulse amongst our writers which is extremely detrimental to writing because every Indian writer is addressing the same white-man reader" (Evain, Carolan 2013) – a concern that is broadly echoed amongst writers and critics focused on post-colonial writing.

The recognition that the book industry is controlled by a readership who can afford to buy books – (the "white-man reader" of Tejpal's comment (Evain, Carolan 2014, 11) – leads to a pessimistic discourse where publishing becomes a business ruled by commercial interests and art is relegated to the periphery of the book world. Are publishers' choices systematically driven by such commercial assumptions?

The "commodification" (Hinsley 1990, 344–345) of what some critics label "exotic writing" does not uniquely apply to the so-called "exotic" category (i.e. non-American or British) but it is part of a bigger picture, best described as forces of "market fundamentalism" at work in the book industry. However, the highly commercial world which rules the book industry today provides the global context in which emerging literatures are fighting their way toward national and international recognition, and therefore the global context is part of today's reality when it comes to tuning in to the new voices of emerging literatures.

Our purpose in this article will not necessarily be to go into the many questions concerning the global context of the industry's commercialism, although certain references and comments may point to such debates. The objective of this article is simply to provide a description of one emerging literature: the case of Ugandan literature. We will endeavour to paint a picture of the Ugandan book scene, by bringing together the view of two critics standing on the outside of Uganda and looking in from Europe, with the experience of two literary professionals who have been committed to the Ugandan book world for over twenty years. This collaboration will lead us to describe the Ugandan book world in broad and simple terms for non-specialists, but it will also provide examples and insights that will hopefully be valuable to Ugandan readers who, like the Canadian readers at the beginning of Atwood's career, may be wrestling with the question of literary self-image.

The article will be articulated as follows: First we will depict the broader context of the emergence of national literatures in the English-speaking countries of the African continent.

Then we will analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the book industry in Uganda. Finally, we will take a close look at the economic liberalization of the 1990s and its consequences on indigenous publishing. We will highlight the importance of a few publishing houses in the context of Ugandan literature.

2. The Emergence of National English-speaking Literatures in the English-speaking Countries of the African Continent

The emergence of national English-speaking book ventures in the English-speaking countries of the African continent was stimulated by several international initiatives (Note 3). The main ones date back, for one – the *African Writers Series* (AWS) – to the early 1960s and, for the other – the African Books Collective – to the end of the 1980s. Both emanated from Africans collaborating with non-Africans in order to create international networks and institutions. They were created not by the "former oppressor" but by a group of individuals getting involved in the project because of heuristic motivations, following in the footsteps of the linguists and ethnologists of the XIXth century (Mouralis 2004).

Because AWS and ABC predate the creation of the main publishing houses in Uganda today, we will start by describing them briefly. We shall also include a third, more recent initiative, dating back to 2000: The Caine Prize for African Writing. All three literary initiatives were initially based in London, and, from the start, they sought to promote African writing in collaboration with African partners. We will proceed in a chronological order, focusing first on a collection of books – the *African Writers Series* (AWS) – , second, on a distribution network – the African Books Collective and third on a literary prize –The Caine Prize for African Writing. In each case we will outline how these organizations came about and how they collaborate with African countries and mainly with Ugandan publishing initiatives.

2.1 *African Writers Series*

African Writers Series (AWS) is a series of books by African writers that has been published by the London-based publisher Heinemann Educational Books (HEB). Since 1962, the series has ensured an international voice to major African writers (Note 4). Indeed, the AWS created a forum for post-independence African writers. Most of the books were designed for classroom use, and they were printed solely in paperback to make them affordable for African students and African educational institutions. HEB also ensured that the books were published outside England, in various African cities (mainly Nairobi and Ibadan).

The idea of the series came from Heinemann executive, Alan Hill, who wanted to promote original African literature. As the first advisory editor to the series Chinua Achebe explained in a lecture in 1998 at Harvard: “The launching of the Heinemann’s *African Writers Series* was like the umpire’s signal for which African writers had been waiting on the starting line. In one short generation an immense library of writing had sprung into being from all over the continent and, for the first time in history, Africa’s future generations of readers and writers – youngsters in schools and colleges – began to read not only David Copperfield and other English classics that I and my generation had read, but also works by their own writers and their own people.” (Currey 2008, 1)

The series first focused on West African writers, but soon branched out, publishing the works of East and South African writers. In spite of its fairly successful beginning, the series faced difficulties partly due to the difficulties on the African continent which led to a steep drop in the African book market. By the mid-1980s, Heinemann could only afford to publish one or two new titles a year. Much of the back catalogue was too expensive to maintain and fell out of print. By the early 1990s, however, the series began to revive because of its strategy to branch into new work, republish texts that were originally local only, and release translated works. Meanwhile, many mergers and acquisitions were happening in the book industry. And thus, the AWS was then relaunched by Pearson Education in 2011.

James Currey, the editorial director at Heinemann Educational Books in charge of the *African Writers Series* from 1967 to 1984, published a book retracing the history of AWS, entitled *Africa Writes Back*. A section in this book, entitled “Part 2: Writers from East Africa,” deals with writers from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, including a focus on the oral tradition. Indeed, Currey reports back on how Nairobi became a vivacious intellectual centre by the early 1970s and how work by Kenyan and Ugandan authors began to appear. Currey places great emphasis on Okot p’Bitek (Currey 2008, 98-101) and praises his long poem *Song of Lawino* (first composed in Acoli in 1956 and then in English 10 years later). Currey claims the poem is “the most influential African poem of the 1960s, not only in Uganda but throughout Africa” (Currey 2008, 98). This is how Ugandan literature first steps onto the international scene of literature – an entry not likely to be forgotten.

2.2 *African Books Collective and Africa Book Centre*

African Books Collective (ABC) was founded in 1989, four years after a group of African publishers met to address the shortage of African published materials and the constraints publishers were experiencing in the marketing of their books. According to the ABC website, the initiative was “a collective self-help initiative to strengthen the economic base of independent African publishers and to meet the needs of Northern libraries and other book buyers.” The ABC was initially supported by funding agencies but then became self-financing in 2017, and moved to a largely digital model.

According to further information posted on their website, ABC is an “African owned, worldwide marketing and distribution outlet for 2,500 print titles from Africa, of which 800 are also ebooks – scholarly, literature and children’s books. Founded, owned and governed by a group of African publishers, its participants are 154 independent and autonomous African publishers from 24 countries.”

ABC provides a distribution option for independent African publishers which competitors find hard to beat. They are a well-established reference who deal with African publishers’ main distribution headaches – from their online presence to international payment facilities.

The books are not only available online through a partnership with Amazon (and other major online booksellers), but they are also stocked by ABC from the leading publishers in Africa. The titles include scholarly, literary, art books, children’s books, and books in African languages and in translation. While most English-tongue titles are available in print, some European and African language books are available in ebook format.

ABC boasts 154 members who are autonomous African publishers on the Continent: “[Our 154 members] share a common ethos of publishing from within African cultures, asserting Africa’s voice within Africa and internationally. They include scholarly and literary, and some children’s book publishers: research institutes, university presses, commercial presses – large and small, NGOs, and writers’ organisations. Of the 24 countries where the publishers are based, over half include participants who are women publishers.” (African Books Collective website n.d.)

In Uganda, there are 4 ABC members:

- Fountain Publishers Ltd.,
- FEMRITE (Uganda Women Writers' Association),
- Pelican Publishers,
- Progressive Publishing House.

These four publishing houses are all based in Kampala and they have very different editorial strategies and personalities.

While online bookselling is taking off for African publishers, the distribution of their books through physical bookstores outside remains a sore point. It is a well-known fact that physical bookstores have been struggling ever since Amazon established itself as the main online bookseller. It is particularly difficult for highly specialized bookstores to survive. For example, the Africa Book Centre which was founded in the same year as ABC – in 1989 – recently closed down its shop, previously located at 38, King Street, Covent Garden. It is currently operating solely as a mail order bookseller from their Brighton offices because their physical store has closed.

2.3 *The Caine Prize for African Writing*

The Caine Prize of £10,000 is awarded annually for a short story by an African writer published in English. According to the Caine prize regulations, an African writer is defined as “someone who was born in Africa, or who is a national of an African country, or who has a parent who is African by birth or nationality”. The shortlisted writers are also rewarded and they receive £500 each. But the most important reward for these writers is perhaps to be given the opportunity of being published in a collection of short-stories.

The Prize is not named after an African man of letters, but after the late Sir Michael Caine, who chaired the Booker Prize management committee for nearly 25 years. However, the African winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Wole Soyinka and J M Coetzee, joined the Caine Prize organization as patrons. Coetzee is quoted on the website to emphasize the benefits of the prize for African writing: “Over the years, the Caine Prize has done a great deal to foster writing in Africa and bring exciting new African writers to the attention of wider audiences”.

The prize was first awarded in 2000 to the Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela for her short story “The Museum”. This event was celebrated at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in Harare. In its first year the Prize attracted entries from 20 African countries. Seventeen years later, it attracts 148 entries from 22 African countries

Every year, the winner is announced at a dinner in Oxford in July, to which the shortlisted candidates are all invited. This is part of a week of activities for the candidates, including readings, book signings and press opportunities.

Previous winners include several writers from eight of the 22 applicant African countries:

- 5 from Nigeria (Helon Habila in 2001, Segun Afolabi in 2005, EC Osondu in 2009, Rotimi Babatunde in 2012, Tope Folarin in 2013);
- 3 from South Africa (Mary Watson in 2006, Henrietta Rose-Innes in 2008, Lidudumalingani in 2016);
- 3 from Kenya (Binyavanga Wainaina in 2002, Yvonne Owuor in 2003, Okwiri Oduor in 2014);
- 2 from Sudan (Leila Aboulela in 2000, Bushra al-Fadil in 2017);
- 2 from Zimbabwe (Brian Chikwava in 2004, NoViolet Bulawayo in 2011);
- 1 from Sierra Leone (Olufemi Terry in 2010);
- 1 from Zambia (Namwali Serpell in 2015);
- 1 from Uganda (Monica Arac de Nyeko in 2007).

So far, only one Ugandan writer has won the prize, but a few Ugandan writers have been showcased in the Caine Prize anthologies, especially in 2013 when the Caine Prize annual workshop was held in Uganda. This goes to show that the Caine Prize annual workshop and anthology combined help to empower writers and to give them the time, space and encouragement they need to write.

Indeed, every year, the five shortlisted stories, alongside the 11 stories written at the Caine Prize annual workshop in Tanzania, are published by New Internationalist (UK). This publishing institution unites with 11 publishers representing 18 African countries: ‘amaBooks (Zimbabwe), FEMRITE (Uganda), Gadsden Publishers (Zambia), Huza Press (Rwanda), Interlink (USA), Jacana Media (South Africa), Kwani? (Kenya), Mkuki na Nyota (Tanzania), Lantern Books (Nigeria), Redsea Cultural Foundation (Somaliland, Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and UAE) and Sub-Saharan Publishers (Ghana). The way that New Internationalist operates with its partners is simply by providing the print-ready PDF to all the African co-publishers (free of charge). Caine Prize anthologies then become available from the publishers direct or from the Africa Book Centre, African Books Collective or Amazon.

2.4 Critical Reception

While the Caine Prize for African Writing has been praised for African literature by showcasing some truly good works by African writers, it has also been heavily criticized. African writer Ikhida R. Ikheloa repeatedly commented on the Caine Prize (Ikhida R. Ikheloa 2012, 2013, 2014) and pointed out the dangers: “The creation of a prize for ‘African writing’ may have created the unintended effect of breeding writers willing to stereotype Africa for glory. The mostly lazy, predictable stories that made the 2011 shortlist celebrate orthodoxy and mediocrity.... The problem now is that many writers are skewing their written perspectives to fit what they imagine will sell to the West and the judges of the Caine Prize....” (Ikhida R. Ikheloa 2012). This comment chimes in with the criticism of “postcolonial criticism” which, according to Bayart, leads to “identity retraction” when all the attention is focused on colonial brutality and none on the cultural essence of different cultures (Bayart 2010, 69).

What is the reason for stereotyping, or for this “Orientalizing process”, to use Said’s expression? Postcolonial guilt alone does not account for the success of such stereotypes, but rather one needs to better understand the workings of market forces: and to put it plainly, “[S]tereotyp[ing] Africa for glory” simply implies selling out to the audience. In many ways, this criticism of making concession to the market is not new, and it has been the subject of many reflections, ever since artists started to reflect on the function of their art. Lewis Hyde underlined an “irreconcilable conflict between the gift exchange and the market, and (...) as a consequence, the artist must suffer a constant tension between the gift sphere to which his work pertains and the market society which is his context.” (Hyde 1999, 273)

This tension between the gift sphere and the market, as well as criticism of “[S]tereotyp[ing] Africa for glory” are not exclusively related to the question of literary prizes: they are motifs that run through this paper and are interconnected to the questions raised in our introduction.

2.5 Other International Initiatives

Other international organisations which contribute to promoting books in Africa would be worth mentioning in this section. Organisations such as Book Aid International, the British Council and the World Bank, the African Book Development Association have endeavoured to promote the provision of books, mainly for the school systems of many African countries and have thus greatly contributed to raising literacy levels and interest in books.

Many university research groups and institutions are equally active, as well as private or semi-private organisations such as IBBY, which rely on fund-raising and the generosity of their members.

While it would be worthwhile to detail them out, our focus remains Ugandan literature. And therefore we are now turning our attention to the indigenous industry, in order to highlight both its strong points and weaknesses, as well as its recent evolution and future perspectives.

3. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Book Industry in Uganda Results

Uganda shares many common traits with some of the English-speaking African countries which are leading members of the three initiatives described above – mainly the *African Writers Series*, the African Books Collective and the CAINE Prize. Like its neighbouring countries, but also like India and many other post-colonial countries, Uganda has a history of power and identity struggles; its context is one of a multi-cultural and multi-language nation with a vibrant tradition of orality.

In comparison to Nigeria, Uganda is not a highly-populated country. Indeed, with just over 37 million people, according to the 2014 census, it ranks far behind Nigeria (which has over 181 million people) and closer to Kenya (over 45 million people). Uganda’s economic development, as far as the book industry is concerned, is proportional to population size, perhaps because the population size is also indicative of the internal market size: 288 titles published in the mid-nineties, that is, five times less than Nigeria at that period whose population size was and is about five times greater than the one of Uganda. While recent figures are difficult to obtain, the five to one ratio, when comparing Uganda’s and Nigeria’s book industries is a realistic estimate, both in population and market size and in the number of books published yearly.

The question of critical market size – internal and external – is a recurrent one, not just for post-colonial countries, but for the publishing industries of all the countries on this planet. What makes the matter more complex is the question of market types. When Canada’s publishing industry took off in the 1970s, although population size was merely one 10th of that of the United States, the internal market opportunities were dual: the educational market, and the non-educational market, i.e. a market comprised of private individuals inclined to purchase books which were marketed to them at affordable prices. The non-educational market is practically non-existent in many developing countries: the people lack the purchasing power which the publishing houses would need in order to balance their books. The publisher’s catalogue is conditioned by these market opportunities – or lack thereof.

In the case of multi-lingual countries – like Uganda – market size is also linked to the question of what language the books

are published in. Indeed, in an environment which is strongly multi lingual (Runyankore, Luganda, Luo and Swahili and English, to name but a few of the languages of Uganda), the national market is divided into sub-sections. This not only affects non-educational segments of the market, but also educational segments. The same “mother tongue versus second language” debate prevails as in most post-colonial countries.

In Uganda, most of the growth in publishing is achieved through educational books – which is the typical pattern observed in all developing countries which do manage to encourage the publishing industry whose objective converges with the government’s educational priorities.

While it is true that many developing countries from Asia, to South America and Africa have a publishing ratio of educational books and non-educational books of about 80 to 20, our purpose here, in this article, will be to highlight publishing institutions and initiatives in Uganda that relate to non-educational books. The relative importance of the non-educational book sectors is increasing, although it has not reached the 20% rate of several African countries. In the case of Uganda, it is difficult to obtain a recent figure. Back in 2002, it was estimated that around 95 per cent of all books produced in Africa were textbooks (Machet 2002, 69); this balance is now gradually evolving in favour of non-educational books.

We will first retrace the turning point of Ugandan literature, in terms of overcoming the trauma of Idi Amin’s terror regime. Then we will look at Ugandan institutions for the promotion of books, starting with the National Book Trust of Uganda (NABOTU). NABOTU is indeed the principle body representing the publishing sector in the country. But there are several other smaller institutions which have growth potential and which equally promote the Ugandan book culture. Therefore, in presenting the book ecosystem, we will seek to include not only NABOTU and NABOTU members, but also institutions such as the Uganda Women Writers Association, the Uganda Booksellers Association and CACE and all the partners of these institutions. And finally, by turning to the publishers themselves, we will pay a special interest to the non-educational book publishers and highlight their originality, their goal and mission – a mission which may be seen as self-attributed or assigned or expected by local communities.

3.1 Emergence of Uganda’s Indigenous Publishing Tradition

As in many developing countries, Uganda’s publishing industry depends heavily on the education sector. Historically, when books started entering Uganda in the 20th century, it came from the demand of missionaries whose mission it was to educate and spread Christian values. The books were provided by British publishers since Uganda did not have an indigenous publishing tradition. In fact, Uganda did not have a tradition of reading and writing at all before the missionaries introduced it because its poetical and narrative tradition was an oral one (Jönsson and Olsson 2007, 33) – and a very rich one too (Currey 2008, 98-101).

During the colonial years, British publishers continued to distribute books to Uganda. Some – but not all – of these publishers are still major players within the publishing industry in Uganda in spite of recent measures to encourage indigenous publishing. For a long time, the educational books produced in Uganda (i.e. the larger part of books published) were printed in Britain and created with British pupils in mind. After independence, there was a movement towards publishing not only educational material, but also poetry and fiction (Tumusiime 2000, 14).

However, in the early seventies the small publishing industry that was present in Uganda collapsed as a result of Idi Amin’s regime. Indeed, as Whitworth, Kuteesa, and Tumusiime-Mutebile indicate: “Following Idi Amin’s coup in 1971, Uganda suffered fifteen years of brutality and civil war, which turned one of Africa’s more prosperous economies into one of the poorest.” (Whitworth et al. 2010, 1). Amnesty International estimates that the number of killings during Idi Amin’s rule was at least 100 000 and possibly as many as 500 000 (Amnesty International 1993, 12). This does illustrate the climate of violence that prevailed in Uganda up until the end of his regime in 1979 and Museveni’s arrival in power.

It was not until the early nineties that the book economy began to recover from its collapse: book projects geared at providing books for school were then developed and the supply of books in schools began to rise. This was a very slow process because the situation was still in favour of international publishers over local publishers. Indeed, in order to improve the collections of textbooks in schools, the government imported books instead of supporting local publishers (Tumusiime 2000, 16). Only in the mid-nineties did the situation change for the better: the government began to buy books from both international and local publishers. It was then estimated that around 95 per cent of all books produced in Africa were textbooks (Machet 2002, 69), which was a progress from practically no books at all.

This turn of events was part of the Government of Uganda’s ambitious programme of educational reform: the Education Strategic Investment Plan (ESIP). The first plan covered the period from 1998 to 2003. The 1998 textbook policy is related to this plan and it involves a simple measure in increasing the book to student ratios at all levels of education. Indeed, the objective was to provide more books for every school, all of which are potentially sourced by indigenous publishers. “Currently the Uganda book to student ratio for the primary level is about one book to 13 students. At the

secondary level it is about two books for each student while at the tertiary level (in universities) there are 10 books per student. Most of these are textbooks or religious treatises. In my period as Executive Director of NCHE (2002-2012), only one or two institutions had the required ratio of forty books to one student.” (Kasozi 2015)

However, the new textbook policy did not solve all of the problems of the publishing industry in Uganda, even if it can readily be identified as a new beginning. Today the Ugandan publishing industry is facing many different challenges. Some of the obstacles which are often mentioned as the reasons for the weak book market are the same as the ones that other African countries seem to be confronted with: lack of a reading culture, illiteracy, lack of bookstores and poor distribution channels, poor library and poor library networks, a lack of skilled staff and equipment, and poverty, the greatest evil of all because it interconnects all other factors and demonstrates that a “vicious circle ” is at work. The book industry’s vicious circle is the following: “lack of reading materials, hence no reading culture, hence no market for reading material, hence no publishing, hence the vicious cycle continues” (Sturges and Neill 1998, 24; Tumusiime 2000, 19; Mbawaki 2005, 5f; Jönsson and Olsson 2008, 34).

Since the educational reforms of the late 1990s, Uganda’s publishing industry has felt the need to build strength through structural changes. These have been achieved – and the work is still in progress – through the creation of key institutions beneficial to publishing and book culture which range from the main professional institution, NABOTU, to more specialized organizations, such as the Uganda Women Writers Association.

3.2 NABOTU and NABOTU Members

The main book institution, the National Book Trust of Uganda, was founded fairly recently, in 1997, nine years after Museveni came to power. But it was actually the successor to the Uganda Publishers and Booksellers Association (UPABA) which had been formed in the early 1990s, just as the book industry was starting to recover from Idi Amin’s regime. While the UPABA was mainly a forum for promoting a good policy environment for Uganda’s publishing industry, NABOTU’s ambition is greater. NABOTU was born of the necessity to embrace an open and competitive publishing environment. It was also a response to the new opportunities following the adoption of the Uganda textbook policy in 1998.

Some of NABOTU’s development programmes are sponsored by foreign and local organizations. Literacy enhancement is one of NABOTU’s priorities, mainly with the Children’s Reading Tent (CRT) program which introduces school children to reading for pleasure (Jönsson and Olsson 2008 10). CRT activities range from silent reading and writing, to read-aloud-marathons, storytelling and poetry recitals. The CRT program also offers teacher training in teaching reading methods, promoting reading and managing school libraries. Other activities include teaching children basic reading skills and donating local and international children’s storybooks to the schools.

Another component of the program is business development. Over 20 indigenous publishing houses of different sizes have been trained in policy environment or book promotion activities. In addition, NABOTU helped establish 300 formal bookshops following the adoption of a decentralised book procurement system based at the school using a local bookshop. NABOTU contributed to policy-making including the adoption of a zero rating of books in terms of taxation policy.

3.4 The Uganda Society

The Uganda Society works to promote and preserve Uganda’s literary, scientific and cultural heritage in all of its diversity. It’s one of Africa’s leading academic societies with a respected multi-disciplinary tradition.

The Uganda Society has a library (Note 5), located at the Uganda Museum, and a journal, the Uganda Journal, has been praised throughout Africa and around the world since 1934. It offers an international readership regular access to contemporary studies, ideas and information. It is a common platform for Ugandan and international researchers. The number of Ugandan researchers largely outweighs the number of foreign researchers.

3.5 Centre for African Cultural Excellence

Centre for African cultural excellence (CACE) Africa is a not-for-profit organization for the reflection and discussion of Africa’s contemporary literary cultures. CACE was founded in 2012 by three young Africans (Note 6) who were committed to promoting Ugandan culture through an African perspective. CACE’s projects include; Writivism Literary Festival, Literary Awards, Publishing, A Dialogue of Tongues, Book Talk Conversations and Zilolonge Arts Literacy Project. CACE has, in the last few years, become the main conduit through which prized African literary works reach the Ugandan audience.

3.6 The Evolution of Publishing in Uganda since the 1990s

After having focused on the bodies which provide a fruitful context for the development of publishing, let us focus on the publishing houses themselves. As previously mentioned the most growth in publishing in developing countries is achieved through the production of educational books. While non-educational books do not represent a large part of the

industry, they do cover all the other sectors of the book industry. UPA lists out registered Book publishers which include the following categories: 37 Children's book publishers; 36 Comic book publishers; 25 Magazines and 37 Management book publishers. Tour guides and cook books are not covered by these categories, but they are becoming quite common. However, in most cases, it's the same publishers who publish the guides, recipes, and motivational/self-help books..

4. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Book Industry in Uganda

According to Commonwealthofnations.org, private sector publishing has flourished in Uganda since the economic liberalization of the 1990s. The phenomenon is similar – but not identical – to the one in India, when India gradually abandoned its self-reliance policy in the late 1980s. The former “big six” publishers – Simon & Schuster, Random House, HarperCollins, Hachette, Macmillan and Penguin Group – came into India; they empowered Indian editors (employed locally) to make all the editorial decisions and to produce titles written by Indian writers. Very much like when these same foreign publishers went into Canada, they gave the host country with “post-colonial” status total editorial freedom. But this so-called total editorial freedom was soon put into question, first in Canada and now in India – hence the caution of many post-colonial countries to allow the establishment of foreign publishing houses. Obviously, caution works both ways: the former “big six” which have turned into the “big five” since the merger of Penguin and Random House, do question market size and market potential before investing in post-colonial countries.

In Uganda, not all of the international “big five” publishing firms are now present. Indeed, only two of the “big five” have created subsidiaries in Uganda: Longman Uganda Limited and Macmillan Uganda Limited. Both companies are of great importance. Macmillan Uganda Limited which trades as Moran (Uganda) Publishers Limited (which has settled more for distribution than publishing), specializes in educational publishing.

Indigenous publishers are also taking off, although the process has been hindered by a number of factors. James Tumusiime, who, today, is at the head of Fountain Publishers, exposes the “shaky roots of Corporate Uganda” (Matsiko 2017). According to Tumusiime, the British did not build a sound indigenous corporate management class: “...all companies were British, senior managers and directors were British. ‘Ugandans were not sufficiently exposed to corporate governance at the high decision-making level. Companies like Nytil had British managers, with Indians as middlemen to supply cotton they bought from Uganda farmers. The Ugandans there did clerical jobs.’” (Matsiko 2017)

Consequently, when Uganda became independent, there was no indigenous management skills pool to run the corporate world. Today, parastatals are known for their poor work ethic, lack of sound management and accounting principles. Uganda's economy was further damaged by the Amin era. Like other sectors, before the 1990s, the publishing industry was foreign-dominated and served British interests. Even when books of a so-called “African focus” were produced, the whole value chain from editing, proof-reading, to designing was carried out outside Africa:

“There was no local investment to develop new books, except those needed in the school curriculum...a publishing house is situated between the cathedral and the stock market. There must be investment of the profits earned from the sale of syllabus books, into areas that are not profit-making but essential to society like local languages, children readers, and scholarly books. This was not possible at the time when the industry was dominated by foreign publishing houses,” he asserts. (Matsiko 2017)

Fountain Publishers which was created in 1996 has gradually grown to be the biggest indigenous publishing house in the country. According to Tumusiime, it lives “to its dual-role of being situated between the cathedral and the stock-market. Proceeds from government contract books are ploughed into non-syllabus, but essential literature. This would otherwise get marginalised in a country where there is no support for authors or publishers.” Indeed, lack of a plan or even will to grow local authors and publishers is certainly a big challenge. Additional challenges range from issues of capacity e.g. editorial, publishing budgets, even the craft of writing/writing knowledge. In a way, the textbook market/focus has also stifled the other non-educational literature.

As for other home-bred Ugandan publishers, there are a few. Four of them have been previously listed as members of African Books Collective:

- Fountain Publishers Ltd.,
- FEMRITE – Uganda Women Writers' Association,
- Pelican Publishers,
- Progressive Publishing House.

While Fountain Publishers Limited is one of the major local publishing houses in the country, the other three – all except FEMRITE – produce a variety of products from academic and school textbooks to fiction and tourist-related literature. As for Makerere University, it has different branches and projects but it is struggling to be functional. For example, MAWAZO for the humanities and social sciences are very irregular and not very esteemed.

4.1 FEMRITE

The Uganda Women Writers Association – FEMRITE is an indigenous, non-governmental, non-profit making women’s organization that was founded by a small group of women writers and launched on 3rd May 1996. Since inception, FEMRITE has grown in membership, publishing, training and promoting writers, some of whom have received national and international recognition. FEMRITE has increased the number and visibility of women writers in Uganda and Africa. In the last twenty years, FEMRITE has become the largest and most successful women’s writing group in East Africa and one of the most influential literary communities on the African continent (Stratford 2015). For several years, the organization has also been engaged seeking interventions in the policies that govern set books for Literature in secondary and tertiary institutions in Uganda with the aim of promoting Ugandan (Musunguzi 2011).

4.2 *The Journey and Vocation of Small Indigenous Publishing Houses*

When analysing the rise of post-colonial literatures in developed countries, researchers find that it is related to the simultaneity of the following four phenomena:

- an audience overcoming the “colonial inferiority” complex and eager to discover national authors;
- journalistic and academic critics as well as passionate publishers who wish to promote national production;
- talented writers who actively participate in the cultural life of the country;
- institutions and commercial networks aiming at offering the emerging literature both national and international visibility. (Evain and Dorel 2009, 90).

Because Uganda is experiencing these four phenomena, a fruitful parallel can be drawn with Canada from the 1950s until the 90s. Northrop Frye, just before his death in 1991, wonders at the literary production of the 1960s: “English Canada, the land nobody wanted, the land that seemed unable to communicate except by railways and bridges, began, from about 1960 on, to produce a literature of a scope and integrity admired the world over” (Note 7). The contrast with the publishing landscape of the 1950s is best described in the arrogance of the famous American editor, Alfred Knopf, who declared, when traveling to Canada in 1955: “[I came] to see if I can uncover some Canadian writing talent – which I don’t expect to do. The country seems to be peopled with involuted and convoluted Englishmen who don’t have much to say” (King 1999, 51).

The arrogance of American editor, Alfred Knopf is mirrored in the colonial attitude which prevailed in Uganda during the seven decades when the British were in power. This left a mark on Uganda – and sadly, not a positive one, as we have previously explained. However, several small indigenous publishing houses have taken off since the 1990s. In their editorial efforts, they proceed in a similar way: they start by identifying particular topics or knowledge gaps that need addressing. They seek and process the material that they find. Over the last two decades, small indigenous publishing houses in Uganda have learned editing, proof-reading, designing, printing and distribution. All this used to be done outside Uganda. While Uganda has acquired the skills to develop books, it is now in a position to keep the earnings at these value chain stages. While these earnings are minimal, it allows the small indigenous publishing houses to keep operating and to remain true to their vocation.

Small indigenous publishing houses are key to the development of a nation’s voice. They are the ones that first start to take an indigenous literature seriously, and in doing so, they are ahead of all national and international readerships. They not only strive to protect, encourage and defend a nation’s voice but they also make the publishing of this voice a financially viable enterprise. They look for national and international markets. They are active in advocacy programmes and networking. They work on the editorial aspects of books and they worry about all commercial aspects to ensure that the books they publish will find their readerships. Thus, small indigenous publishing houses are the seedbed of a nation’s publishing industry.

In many ways, small indigenous publishing houses are also the midwives of the nation. Take for example, FEMRITE’s self-assigned mission when embarking on the “I dare to say: African women share their stories of hope and survival” book project (Twongyeirwe 2012): in order to collect stories of the nation, the FEMRITE team trained script-writers for them to go out into the field, identify women who had stories to tell and gather their testimonies. The objective for FEMRITE’s scriptwriters was to “venture beyond the stories of the surface” (Twongyeirwe 2012, xiv). FEMRITE went as far as to organize meetings, once the testimonies were gathered, where scriptwriters received feedback and discussed the stories with the editors of the project. Such a project is of extremely high literary value and, in many ways, it is akin to Svetlana Alexandrovna Alexievich’s project for which she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016. Alexievich’s writing displays “large-scale disasters of the twentieth century using private human history to create a portrait of time” (Blissett 2014) – stories which Alexievich collected. FEMRITE’s I dare to say is equally about polyphonic writings which bear testimony to suffering and the courage of women in Uganda in recent times.

While small indigenous publishing houses seek to discover original voices, it is also their job to be profitable. Jack McClelland, Canada's first legendary editor, was famous not only for his love of literature (the work of "his" authors), but also his pragmatic approach. It was Jack McClelland who coined the term "koob" to describe a book of potentially great sales value, but low literary value. He thus underlined the need to make the distinction between books that a publisher needs for business purposes (koobs) and books that truly deserve his respect (Note 8).

Small indigenous publishing houses can adopt such a pragmatic approach as long as they are not dominated by large foreign-owned groups. Therefore, while it is a struggle for these small businesses to balance the accounts, it can also be considered as a privilege to have total editorial freedom. The expression "total editorial freedom" should also be examined closely in the light of a political context, but this would be the subject of a whole other article. Suffice to say that "total editorial freedom" starts with the will to steer away from market fundamentalism and the refusal to be driven by profits only.

5. Conclusion

The political and social, cultural and economic effects of colonialism, as outlined by postcolonial criticism, is one of fragmented postcolonial identities. However postcolonial criticism has moved beyond what Andrew Roberts would describe as "the colonial moment" and relativized the impact of the colonial situation in order not to define former colonies merely in relation to their former status of subjected people. Critics and publishers endeavour to pay more attention to the cultural richness to be found in the different African countries, seeking to highlight a "soul" that implies a metaphysical essence (Note 9) which can be made visible in regional literature. In that sense, the Ugandan publishing community is not to be considered as an isolated case study. Questions related to supporting the expression of regional cultural identity have been raised by all post-colonial countries, including those whose economic development is comparable to countries like Canada or Australia. Questions concerning governmental support are constantly being included in advocacy programmes and discourses. The example of Canada is often referred to: "In Canada for example, government supports local authors and publishers, to prevent American literature from invading and suppressing Canadian knowledge, Uganda needs to do the same," Mr Tumusiime asserts." (Matsiko 2017).

Countries that have a poor internal market for non-educational books experience greater difficulties in developing their indigenous industries than developed countries, such as Canada. It is perhaps in this context that the role of publishers becomes an even greater challenge, as well as a true vocation.

Perhaps some of the downsides of publishing are equally amplified: the dream of making it "big time" as a publisher looms on the horizon. Indian publishers, for example, have spoken of the dangers of seeking to ride on the coat-tails of a famous best-selling western author, or of wanting to imitate their style, or of having the "white man reader" model in mind. This tends to distort the motivation publishers had for coming into publishing in the first place, which is usually to uncover original talents and to give voice to the voiceless. Such a statement however is problematic because this very vocation of giving voice to the voiceless is not an enterprise which is limited by national borders. Readers, writers and publishers do have a lot to gain from opening up to the world. A recent example of that is Anne Morgan's initiative entitled "My year reading a book from every country in the world". Paradoxically, such a project also points to the existence of national traits since books are said to carry the spirit of their country. In order to identify such national traits in Ugandan literature, one would need to examine specific examples of fiction and non-fiction and highlight the rich oral tradition – this indeed will be the subject of our next articles. Uganda's literary journey, like the one of many post-colonial countries, follows recognizable steps: the recognition of an original oral tradition, the rejection of the ex-colonizer's oppression, the realization that the English language does have a national unifying function, the use of English for a literature which both transcribes the oral tradition and collects life testimonies of the Ugandan people. It is this journey which provides the basis for an emerging literature. However, no sooner has a nation embarked on such a journey, that it is subjected to market forces, which leads us to the final question raised in this article: "Should writers carry the burden of being voices of their communities?" And by "burden", we mean the heavy responsibility involved in finding ways to make the enterprise a financially viable one. We can only conclude with an ambivalent answer to such a question. Yes, publishers should be on the lookout for original voices which express the soul of their country, but no, they should not be carrying this responsibility alone. As we have seen throughout this article, there are many ways in which small indigenous publishing houses can receive help. But it is the responsibility of the whole community to support the efforts of the indigenous publishing industries.

It is only through this collective support that all players within the book industry – from the author to the bookseller – will resist the temptation of writing or reading in cliché about Africa and selling out to a Western audience.

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Notes

Note 1. *Survival* is Atwood's first critical volume, soon to be followed by other critical essays brought together in *Second Words* (1982) and, another critical volume, in 1995, entitled *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* which also points to the specificities of Canadian writing. In the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and even 1990s, Atwood set out to demonstrate that it was possible to find common themes in a nation's literature, and her critical volumes are not only informative but also insightful in highlighting the originality of such themes

Note 2. Canadian post-colonial critics from Northrop Frye (1995) to Foster and McChesney (2003) to Cynthia Sugars (2004) repeatedly commented on this inferiority complex, as did many authors. Atwood, not only underlined this complex but she also highlighted the consequences for the authors of the time : "Because the few established publishers were reluctant to publish work that was too experimental or too nationalist – the two were, strangely enough, sometimes equated – writers became involved in setting up their own publishing companies. Nobody expected the results. The growth of both audience and industry between 1965 and 1970 was phenomenal. To our surprise, people, even Canadian people, wanted to read what we wanted to write. Most of us were apolitical art-for-art's-sakers when we set out, but the lesson was clear. American branch plants and our own conservatives wouldn't publish us. If we wanted to be heard, we had to create the means of production and maintain control over it" (Atwood 1982, 384).

Note 3. Critical work mirrors this trend with critics focusing on "African writing" as a whole (Lindfors 1994). From 2000 onwards, indigenous articles start to flourish, with Ugandan output ranging from articles on book content (Gqola 2015, 2017), Ugandan post-colonial analysis (Mwakikagile 2012), (Kamau and Mitambo 2016), to articles on the publishing systems (IDRC 2017).

Note 4. These writers include Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Steve Biko, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nadine Gordimer, Buchi Emecheta, and Okot p'Bitek.

Note 5. The purpose of the library is to acquire and maintain valuable volumes and documents concerning African history, anthropology, languages and natural history with an emphasis on Uganda. There is also a large collection of maps and rare old photographs of Uganda's land and people.

Note 6. Kyomuhendo A. Ateenyi, Naseemah Mohamed and Bwesigye Brian.

Note 7. This comment is reported by Linda Hutcheon in her preface of *The Bush Garden* (Northrop Frye xiii).

Note 8. To quote Jack McClelland: "I propose that we use the term 'koob', book spelt backwards, to describe the sort of impressions from the police blotter that [the American prostitute-turned-author] Ms. Hollander writes... Please don't misunderstand me. I like junk reading. I've sold a lot of koobs in my day and plan to continue to do so, but I do respect books and I think a distinction must be made." (King 1999, 276).

Note 9. Many critics have highlighted the inherent problems of subaltern studies and postcolonial criticism. Both postcolonial criticism and subaltern studies (which aim to restore power to the people – "politics of the people") seem to lead to restrictive views, just as much as the use of "French Theory" in post-colonial criticism: while the use of Foucault's theories on the mechanics of power are extremely useful in analysing the relationships between the coloniser and the colonised, these relationships alone do not define "the colonized" and often lead to the recycling of nationalistic rhetoric. Critics like Frederik Cooper (1993), Jean-François Bayart, Jean-Pierre Chrétien, Gérard Prunier, François-Xavier Verschave favour a more heuristic approach which is both more interdisciplinary, including economic aspects of culture and the metaphysical and focused on the essence of culture (Bayart et al 1998).

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