

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hans Zell and the organic development of African publishing

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Writing a tribute to Hans Zell is, as I realize while writing, both a personal exercise, a demanding task of research, and, above all, a profound continuation of meaning in relation to a person I admire and consider a friend. These are the reasons why I accepted without hesitation the invitation from Stephanie Kitchen and Terry Barringer to write this tribute. It is, therefore, both an honour and a considerable challenge for me to write this 'selective' retrospective, especially as Hans continues to develop his work and to offer new valuable articles and in-depth analyses. It is fascinating, and certainly unique, to think that Hans has been tirelessly publishing his work since 1964. I am also convinced that he will hate reading such a tribute, given that he has always preferred to highlight the work of others and encourage them to follow their own path. I will therefore take full responsibility for this, never mind!

I cannot begin this tribute without reflecting on the history I share with Hans through our correspondence, which began in the late 2000s, and which has gradually made him, in my journey, both a beacon and a role model, as well as a constant support. I also realize that without his wise advice, without his sharp critical eye, without his encouragement and understanding, without his insatiable curiosity and unmatched rigour, I would certainly not have followed the path that led me to advance in research and then, in turn, into the world of African publishing. It is also important to explain that there is Hans Zell the person and intellectual, Hans Zell the conductor of the bibliographic project for analysis and research, and finally, Hans Zell the publisher and publishing consultant. Each facet thus represents a part of an extraordinary professional life and human journey, through which I will attempt to organize my thoughts and to navigate.

Writing this tribute is, once again, an opportunity for me to reflect, allowing me to better grasp the importance of Hans in my own professional and personal life. It is my way of expressing my gratitude and telling him that his monumental work, his progressive openness to my often naïve questions, as well as his generosity, profoundly marked a young French researcher for the entirety of his existence;

a researcher who, without Hans's guidance, might have believed the discourse claiming that meaningful work on and within the African book industry was nothing but a utopia reserved to a few dreamers. Here, I wish to express, in my own words, the respect I feel for Hans and for the immense body of work he has patiently and meticulously built since 1964. This body of work is based on the transmission of invaluable knowledge, the impact of which, though underestimated by some today, remains a fundamental contribution to the documentation and research on books in Africa and, beyond that, for the global publishing industry whose balance rests on interconnectedness and accessible and reliable information on each publisher's market across the globe. But before proposing a path through a selective dive into his journey, I would like to begin my tribute by highlighting several key moments and elements that, in my view, sketch out the immense figure of Hans Zell.

On meeting Hans Zell: a story and a figure of knowledge

At the beginning of my own journey as a researcher and then a literary agent, when I was embarking on my PhD on publishing in Cameroon and its literary dynamics (Thierry 2015), I notably sought the guidance of the late Alain Ricard, a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France and a renowned expert on African literature in African languages. What led me to Ricard was his pioneering work, *Livre et communication au Nigeria* (Ricard 1975), which he had published in 1975 in the field of French studies. It was Ricard who, for the first time, directed me towards the work of Hans Zell whom he had initially met by conducting his research in Nigeria. We were in October 2008:

You would do well to get to know my friend Hans Zell, who lives in the north of Scotland, from where he constantly analyses the state of the book world: take a look at his website and go visit him! It would be a very good investment!¹

At the time, I did not fully appreciate the magnitude and fundamental nature of this advice, which would put me in contact with Hans. More than an investment, this contact proved to be a true turning point in both my personal and professional life. I wrote to Hans through his website and he replied within the week, somewhat casually explaining that he was often approached by researchers, not necessarily with follow-ups, but that he remained curious about my research, the scope of which I would need to clarify. He then referred me to his *African Book Publishing Record* (ABPR), both in its printed version with its 2,517 annotated references and its digital version, updated annually, and wished me good luck in my endeavours.

It was only later, as my research progressed, with frequent immersion in his inexhaustible documentation and the occasional exchanges I had with him over the years – my written English improving somewhat – that I understood that Hans, through his long career, had met simply generations of researchers, consultants, and publishers coming and going throughout the course of a book industry that is often difficult, turbulent, and versatile about its future. His pragmatism, closely tied to his extreme professional rigour, was undoubtedly shaped by this history, and his best

¹ Personal correspondence with author.

response is certainly better formulated through his work and his books: words may fade, while writings remain.

I thus ordered my copy of *ABPR*, which would serve as the documentary basis for writing my doctoral thesis, alongside other major references such as Albert Gérard (Gérard 1986), René Philombe (Philombe 1984), James Currey (Currey 2008), and Richard Bjornson (Bjornson 1991). Hans would later tell me that I was the only individual in France to have ordered it. While this may seem surprising, it highlighted one of the challenges of the book industry and related information in Africa: its fragmentation, especially between the French-speaking world and the English-speaking regions that are historically poorly connected as both are absorbed by their respective linguistic spheres, institutional attractions and professional habits. Through *ABPR* and later through other works by Hans, I discovered many invaluable references on African publishing in French (both past and present), but also a few statements on the difficulty of accessing and updating such information. This integrity in Hans's work is undoubtedly one of his greatest qualities in a world of communication where results – even if superficial – are often prioritized. The invitation of Hans Zell's work, beyond its monumental scope and its indefatigable updating, is to always go beyond accessible information and to take the step towards breaking down barriers: linguistic, regional, and professional barriers that eliminate prejudices and interpretations often fed by incomplete or partial professional information, perpetually outdated due to its lack of systematic updating. This is at least how I interpreted his work, and it is the inspiration he represented for me. I would also come to perceive this dismantling of barriers through its concrete impact when I pushed my research towards constructing an historiography of publishing in Cameroon. For several years, I collected and digitized the entirety of the legendary cultural journal *Abbia*,² published between 1963 and 1982 in Cameroon. In the pages of the final issue, the last spark of the end of an era, I found a critical note by Hans, reproduced in full:

This important literary and cultural magazine has been dormant for a number of years, and everybody will warmly welcome its return This is an essential serials commitment for any library anywhere with collections on African literature and cultures. (Zell 1982)

I then understood an important aspect of the impact of Hans's work: not only has he consistently informed the book world about the realities of publishing in Africa and contributed to breaking down barriers between different publishing regions, but equally importantly, he has enabled publishers and actors in the book industry to maintain a connection, to know that they are part of and exist within a 'global book world', a professional global reality. In doing so, as his old friend, the Ghanaian consultant Richard Crabbe, explained to me during a conference in Nairobi in 2018: 'He has contributed to the constant continuation of an international discourse on publishing in Africa.'

² I didn't know through what channel the journal appeared online with my own scans a few years later, but this represents a very positive step (*Vestige Journal*).

Then came 2015, when Hans invited me, at the request of SCOLMA and of Terry Barringer, editor of *African Research and Documentation* (ARD), to co-write an article on book donations in Africa. I had just published a small study on this subject and appeared on the radio discussing the same theme, and perhaps he thought this topic, which is dear to him, could benefit from a cross-perspective between the anglophone and francophone sides. Initially, I foresaw the article as a brief and classic case study of about ten pages. But as I began to lay the groundwork for my reflection, Hans sent me the draft of his section: 'Book donation in Africa: time for a reappraisal'. Upon opening the file, I was somewhat taken aback, horrified even, to find a fully developed and extremely structured study of nearly a hundred pages, without yet even its annexes (which were still a work in progress). Hence, what began as an article was suddenly turning into a full-length book, which would later be published in 2016 as a dual study (Zell and Thierry 2015). I tried as best as I could to keep my section on the same level as Hans's: a futile attempt, but one that nonetheless brought me immense satisfaction as I discovered and learned from his methodology, critical transparency, and the enormous demand he places on both his work and his subject of analysis. What started as an article thus evolved into a joint effort that became an 'augmented' study where, at Hans's initiative, we invited representatives of the studied organizations to respond to the article and provide their 'right of reply' to our analyses and critiques in a later issue of ARD. The *Konstruktiv Kritik* employed by Hans (perhaps linked to his Swiss-Germanic background?) as well as his broader vision of work that does not simply result in a static publication but continues to evolve, be enriched, and generate commentary – despite how unusual this may seem in an intellectual and research environment that is often traditional and sterile, where any critique is seen as 'undermining' – then became for me an approach that was straightforward, open, and respectful of the people and subject of study and, if I may use the word, 'democratic'.

Some time later, Hans expressed his view of publishing evolution in Africa through the concept of its 'organic development'. I believe this is the key to a better understanding of this vast field, which is so poorly perceived in its diversity and continuous evolution, and the importance of which Hans's work has continually demonstrated, calling for an approach based on constant updates rather than a fixed and limiting thematic, geographical or methodological entry point. It is this continuous opening and constant questioning, even to this day, that I find most fascinating when I observe the work of Hans Zell, which I simply equate to a curiosity that takes shape, notably in his longstanding desire and advocacy for open access through his Academia.edu profile and his website. It is this generosity that I admire, as much as the humility of its author, who once politely declined my invitation to write a book based on an interview with me about his career. In the end, I believe the best testament to the significance of Hans Zell's work lies in its accessibility and its readership, and thus in the influence it has on its readers. I am one of its happy beneficiaries and Hans has more than anyone else changed my perspective on a subject, allowing me to 'see bigger' over the years through *Konstruktiv* re-evaluations.

Finally, I would like to return to the democratic dimension of Hans's engagement, as mentioned earlier: I observe it in his ability to transmit and to give. The logic of transmission without expecting anything in return seems inseparable from his approach and his 'way of being'. In 1995, for example, he donated an initial collection

covering the period from 1960 to 1995 to the African Publishers Network (APNET) based in Harare, marking the beginning of his remarkable commitment to the preservation and development of African publishing studies. Twenty years later, in 2015, he continued this initiative with a major donation to the library of Kwara State University, Nigeria. This collection, covering the period from 1996 to 2014, includes books, monographs, journals, and an online database rich with over 3,000 annotated references. This transfer was accompanied by a digital migration project aimed at improving the accessibility and usefulness of the database. Finally, in 2023, Hans Zell made another valuable donation to the library of the Jesuit Historical Institute of Africa (JHIA) in Nairobi. This donation comprises over 400 works, including titles published by his own publishing house, renowned reference resources, and a collection of books by prominent African authors. Through these three successive donations, he has made a significant contribution to the preservation and circulation of African publishing memory in Africa: a fair and balanced approach, especially when compared to the typical 'fieldwork in Africa' logic often adopted by Global North researchers who then publish their results in journals and books in the North, making them largely inaccessible in Africa – based on a rather 'consumerist' logic.

Lastly, and as a personal anecdote, when I asked Hans about my research on Ken Saro Wiwa he kindly sent me by post, at his own expense, thirty volumes of the legendary *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, of which he had been the publisher and editor for several years – a shipment that proved infinitely useful to me. Having shared these personal anecdotes, I now find it necessary to trace several key milestones of his intellectual and professional journey.

Hans Zell: a life dedicated to books and publishing in Africa

Hans Zell represents much more than just a name in the world of publishing and documentation on the publishing industry in Africa. He embodies a vision, a mission, and an intellectual rigour that have spanned decades, leaving an indelible mark on the global publishing landscape. For more than six decades, his career has been characterized by rare perseverance, unmatched precision, and an unwavering commitment to analysing the current state of African publishing while making information about it as widely accessible as possible. As James C. Armstrong from the Association of College and Research Libraries pointed out: 'It is always a pleasure to pick up a new reference work one knows will prove dependable. Zell's publications give a good measure of that kind of satisfaction'. (Armstrong [n.d.](#))

Born and educated in Zurich, Zell laid the foundations of his career in bookselling at an early age, a vocation that quickly expanded into an international dimension. His early professional experiences took him across continents and institutions. As an apprentice bookseller at Fritz Kellerhals AG in Zurich from 1956 to 1958, while also studying at the Swiss Institute of Commerce, he later worked as an assistant bookseller at Haigh & Hochland in Manchester, from 1959 to 1960. He continued his career in Sweden at Almqvist & Wiksell AB, where he worked as an editor in bibliographic and information services from 1960 to 1962, before joining the Pergamon Press in Oxford, where he led the mail-order sales division and collaborated with the affiliated offices of Robert Maxwell & Co. in New York, Paris, and Long Island City, NY, from 1962 to 1965. From 1965 to 1967, he was director

of the university bookstore at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, in Freetown, marking his first step into the African book world. He then became editor-in-chief at the prominent Africana Publishing Corporation in New York from 1968 to 1970 (Larby 1977). These crucial stages across different publishing worlds likely enabled Hans to develop what would become the strength of his professional and intellectual approach: viewing African books from a broad, global, and inclusive perspective that does not confine discourse and analysis to an isolating particularism but rather considers its full scope and subtleties through the lens of international standards.

One of the major milestones in his journey remains his arrival at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) in Nigeria in the 1970s. This marked a turning point in his career, a pivotal moment when he was entrusted with the mission of setting up both a university bookstore and launching the university press. From 1970 to 1973, when the book industry in Africa was still in its developmental phase dominated by British multinational publishers and the import of European books, with the presence of local publishers still modest, Hans Zell played a key role in projects that would decisively contribute to the structuring of this field:

I spent three enjoyable years in Nigeria in the early 1970s, occupied in two jobs at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). One, based in Ibadan initially, was to set up a new bookshop at the university's main campus at Ile-Ife, and the other was to establish a university press. I was very fortunate to be working under an enlightened Vice Chancellor at the time, Professor Hezekiah Oluwasanmi, a man of great vision, who was always very supportive of anything relating to books, reading, and publishing. (Williams 2018)

These years marked for him a dive into a world where research and publishing were only beginning to take a professional shape, and where literary figures such as Kole Omotoso, Femi Osofisan, and Wole Ogunyemi were rising. It was undoubtedly an exhilarating time when the Nigerian literary and cultural ferment, following a period of great upheaval, opened new paths for world literature. Numerous works published by Nigerian publishers already bore witness to this intellectual production flowing through the country and, increasingly, across the continent.

Hans Zell's involvement in African publishing took on a new dimension in the early 1970s, amidst the context of the International Book Year organized by UNESCO in 1972 and the turning-point of the ratification of the Nairobi Agreement in 1976 (UNESCO 1976). At that time, as publisher for Ife University Press in Nigeria and director of the university bookstores in Ile-Ife and Ibadan, Zell coordinated and led the International Conference on Publishing and Book Development in Africa from December 16 to 20, 1973. This event gathered over a hundred international attendees, the majority of whom were African – publishers, booksellers, librarians, publishing consultants, writers, academics, literary critics, and institutional representatives. The proceedings of this conference, published in 1975 under the title *Publishing in Africa in the Seventies*, became the first large work dedicated to the structural challenges of publishing in Africa and its dynamics across the continent. This was followed by the works of Alain Ricard (Ricard 1975), Robert Estivals (Estivals 1980), S. I. A. Kotei (Kotei 1981), Philip G. Altbach (Altbach 1992), Walter Bgoya (Bgoya 1997), Henry Chakava

(Chakava 1997), and the rise of Hans Zell's bibliographic project. During this conference, Chinua Achebe, who delivered the keynote address, made this historic statement:

Writers, especially established writers, have a responsibility to support an indigenous publisher who displays the necessary qualities of intellect, creativity and organisation, for it is ultimately in the interests of the writer that such a publisher exists. He should be prepared to gamble on the chances of such a publisher – at least once. (Achebe 1975)

This conference took place within a very specific context: during the 1950s and 1960s, decolonization and the Cold War favoured the dissemination of African authors, translated and more widely distributed through clear soft-power dynamics. At the crossroads of these major alignments, the First Congress of Black Artists and Writers, organized by *Présence Africaine* Edition in 1956 in Paris, is considered 'a cultural Bandung' (Frioux-Salgas 2021). This conference played a key role in the rise of a literary market in Africa and influenced initiatives like the *Black Orpheus* journal in Ibadan (1957). In continuity, the Tashkent Conference (1958) and the First African Writers Conference in Makerere, Uganda (1962) supported the internationalization of 'African literature' with very specific political frames. For written works, studies such as Lilyan Kesteloot's *Les Écrivains noirs de langue française* (1963) or Janheinz Jahn's *Die neoafrikanische Literatur* (1965) shed important light on these works widely published and translated in Europe, just as cultural journals like *Black Orpheus* in Nigeria, *Présence Africaine* in France, or *Abbia* in Cameroon opened new literary horizons and contributed to the emergence of new voices from the continent.

For the strictly editorial aspect, two key studies marked the 1960s:

- In 1965, within the framework of UNESCO's Development Decade linked to the Addis Ababa Plan (1961–65) (Matasci 2020) amidst decolonization, René Maheu, General-Director of UNESCO, advocated for technical assistance to develop publishing infrastructures in Africa and promoted the production of educational textbooks. UNESCO then funded the publication of *The Revolution in Books* in 1965, in which the consultant Clifford M. Fyle published what is certainly the first major analytical article dedicated to publishing in Africa: 'A continent in quest of a publishing industry.' (Fyle 1965)
- In 1969, John Nottingham, associated with East African Publishing in Tanzania, published an article entitled 'Establishing an African publishing industry: a study in decolonization', which made a case for the rise of indigenous publishing across anglophone Africa, where subsidiaries of British publishers dominated the market. (Nottingham 1969)

The context of decolonization and subsequent independence movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s was also marked by the vast expansion of American cultural cooperation in Africa, through the *Africana* documentary programme which supported the development of Area Studies in the USA, alongside strengthening library resources across the continent. Hans Zell became actively involved in this from 1965. Besides, one should also recall the discreet yet massive involvement of the

Fairfield Foundation, an offshoot of the CIA, which contributed to the success of various literary or editorial initiatives in Africa, including Ulli Beier's Mbari Club in Nigeria, Nat Nakasa's journal *The Classic* in South Africa, and the 1962 Makerere Conference for African Writers. It is all the more remarkable to note that Hans Zell navigated such a politicized and polarized environment without ever changing his intellectual or professional course, which remained focused on the promotion and documentation of a book industry based in Africa.

The United Nations' 1961 Addis Ababa Plan indirectly fostered initiatives such as Heinemann Educational's *African Writers Series* in the UK (1962) and Hatier's *Classiques du monde* in France (1964). These series significantly contributed to the growth of literature published outside Africa. As noted in 1964, 75 per cent of books sold in Africa were still imported. Conferences like those held by UNESCO in Ghana (1968)³ and by the University of Ife (1973) thus incorporated African literary issues and allowed for a shift beyond mere literacy and textbook production, placing at the centre the challenge of a pan-African publishing industry within a real publishing dynamic of decolonization, building on Nottingham's pioneering thought. The creation of the CREPLA programme (Regional Centre for Book Publishing in Africa) in Cameroon in 1977, prompted again by UNESCO and for which Zell provided consultancy, marked a major advance in reducing linguistic divisions between anglophone and francophone zones and fostering cooperation between publishers across the continent.

The Frankfurt Book Fair, led by Peter Weidhaas, marked a turning point with its 1980 programme dedicated to sub-Saharan Africa, in which Hans Zell participated alongside other key consultants such as Tanzanian publisher Saïd Mzee and Julian Behrstock. This historic edition showcased 2,000 books from 180 publishers across twenty-nine African countries, amid the tense backdrop of apartheid. Zell notably advocated for the inclusion of books from South African publisher Ravan Press, a strong anti-apartheid publisher. He also coordinated the Noma Award on site, funded by the Japanese Shoichi Noma Foundation (Harrell-Bond 1981). At this event, Senegalese author Mariama Bâ received the Noma Award for *So Long a Letter*, translated from French into fourteen languages in subsequent years: it was the first book published in Africa (by Nouvelles Éditions Africaines in Senegal) to be translated worldwide.⁴ This also marked the inaugural international edition of this award, which continued until 2009, recognizing international authors published across the African continent in French, English, Swahili, Gikuyu and Arabic.

Thus, through his experiences and the momentum he generated in Nigeria, Hans Zell represents a kind of through-line and key player in the international rise of African publishing presence, transcending geopolitical, linguistic, and geographical boundaries. This moment would be made concrete a few years later with the creation of a new player in the African publishing field, a direct legacy of the Ife Conference and the 1980 Frankfurt Book Fair: the African Books Collective (ABC).

³ With the strong involvement of Julian Behrstock as a consultant.

⁴ As my research progressed, I came upon a study where I found a photo of Hans facilitating a discussion with Mariama Bâ and her daughter Aminata Diop during the Book Fair. He later sent me a high quality image of the photo by email (Harrell-Bond 1981–82).

African Books Collective

If the 1980 Frankfurt Book Fair marked the peak of two decades of evolution in which Hans Zell had played a significant role, the 1980s signalled a period of transition for Africa's book industry. Starting in 1979, the implementation of structural adjustment programmes by the World Bank across the continent had devastating consequences for the publishing industries in many African countries. Among the casualties was the abrupt cessation of CREPLA's pan-African and international activities in 1982. At the same time, health and hunger crises in the Horn of Africa perpetuated a global narrative of 'famine in Africa', which paralleled the notion of a 'book famine in Africa'. In this challenging context, Tanzanian publisher Walter Bgoya partnered with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in April 1984 to co-direct the first conference in Arusha, Tanzania, on Developing Indigenous Publishing Capacity in Africa. The conclusions of this conference highlighted that:

The majority of publishing houses serving Africa [were] not autonomous. The publishing field [was] dominated by the branches of transnational publishing corporations, all but a few controlled from outside the continent, and by some state publishing houses, which [were] directly or indirectly controlled by governments. (Chakava 1997)

At the same time, Hans Zell was at the helm of Hans Zell Publishers, an imprint specializing in African studies, through which he also distributed works from publishers in South Africa and Tanzania to audiences in the global North. During this time, Zell collaborated with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and African publishers within his network to research the challenges of distributing and marketing African books internationally. These studies revealed two significant barriers: the limited accessibility of African publications in Northern markets and the lack of interest from Western librarians in acquiring these works. Thus Zell played a pivotal role in conceptualizing and structuring ABC, serving as a consultant and actively contributing to the organization's strategic development.

In October 1985, the Second Bookweek Africa was held at the Africa Centre in London, an event set against the backdrop of these challenges. Concurrently, Sida sponsored a seminar titled African Publishers Working Group Meeting on Collective Export Marketing and Promotion at the Grafton Hotel in London. This gathering brought together twelve publishers from across sub-Saharan Africa – including representatives from Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe – alongside Hans Zell Publishers.

It was during this week that the idea of ABC was born, aimed at addressing a different kind of 'famine': the scarcity of African books in Northern markets. The vision was groundbreaking – a platform designed to promote the global commercialization and distribution of African books while fostering the autonomy and collaboration of African publishers. This initiative would ultimately lead to the establishment of the world's first dedicated platform for the marketing and distribution of African publications.

Among the founding members of ABC were some of the most influential figures in African publishing: Walter Bgoya (Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, Tanzania), Henry

Chakava (East African Educational Publishers, Kenya, and a participant in the 1973 Ife Conference), Victor Nwankwo (Fourth Dimension Publishing, Nigeria), Ayo Bamgbose (Ibadan University Press, Nigeria), Mamadou Diouf (CODESRIA, Senegal), and Mothobi Mutloatse (Skotaville Publishers, South Africa). The initiative also benefited from the decisive involvement of consultant Mary Jay – then working with Hans Zell Publishers – and Zell himself. After years of preparation and fundraising, ABC was officially founded in 1989 and commenced operations in 1990. Zell often recalled the significant hurdles faced in those early years, particularly financial constraints:

It took considerable endurance to build up to the self-sufficiency of the last eight years, with times of financial strain and anxiety, but it remains committed to its ethos to strengthen African publishing through collective action, and to increase the visibility and accessibility of the wealth of African scholarship and culture. (Williams 2018)

Hans Zell also represented ABC at international forums. There, he highlighted the challenges faced by African publishing while presenting the innovative solutions proposed by the Collective. This led to the creation of the Bellagio Publishing Network, with Zell compiling the discussions in *Publishing and Development in the Third World* (Altbach 1992). Through his numerous writings and contributions, Zell actively advocated for inclusive publishing policies and practices that gave greater consideration to the African book industry.

Over time, ABC expanded, supported by various grants, the growing commitment of publishers and members, and Zell's key role as an external consultant, particularly in advocacy initiatives. He continued to represent ABC at international meetings, such as the 1991 Bellagio Conference, where he reiterated the challenges of African publishing and ABC's transformative responses. In 1995, Mary Jay assumed the role of CEO, marking a significant shift in the Collective's management.

Following over a decade of development supported by grants and the dedication of an increasing number of publishers and members, combined with Zell's advocacy-driven consulting, ABC evolved into the first autonomous, African-owned distribution platform. The Collective brought together publishers from various sectors, including university presses and children's books, with the shared goal of amplifying Africa's publishing voice on the global stage. Initially, ABC operated as a traditional distribution network reliant on donor funding from organizations such as the Ford Foundation and SIDA. Its primary role was advocacy, which often led to its perception as more of an NGO than a commercial distributor.

During the 2000s, ABC transformed its model by adopting emerging technologies, particularly print-on-demand (POD), enabling books to be produced as needed. After donor funding ceased in 2007, ABC transitioned into a comprehensive digital platform under the leadership of Mary Jay's successor, Justin Cox. This transformation included digitizing its catalogue and leveraging POD for efficient global distribution. The shift allowed ABC to capitalize on the growing e-book market, reaching worldwide audiences through diverse sales channels.

From 2010 onwards, ABC significantly expanded its reach, securing agreements in the United States, China, Germany, and South Africa. The Collective embraced both print and digital formats, meeting the increasing demand for African content,

particularly in academic circles (Cox 2019). The rise of digital distribution and online commerce opened new avenues for ABC's growth. Its digital presence grew steadily, making African books more accessible globally. Through its platform, www.readafricanbooks.com, ABC broadened its reach and fostered dialogue, publishing analyses and studies on the African publishing landscape, filling the gap left by the closure of initiatives like the Bellagio Publishing Network.

In 2020, ABC celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, distributing around 150 publishers and nearly 3,000 titles from across the African continent, in multiple languages. This remarkable achievement transformed the vision articulated in London in 1985 by twelve pioneering publishers, including Hans Zell, into a tangible reality. Today, ABC stands as a unique model of sustainability and economic autonomy, embodying a transformative approach to distribution possibly sparked in the 1970s from Hans Zell Publishers.

A corpus of unique magnitude

Building on the publication of the *Proceedings of the Ife Conference*, the establishment of the *African Book Publishing Record* (ABPR) and Hans Zell Publishers in Oxford in 1975 marked a turning point in Hans Zell's career in its documentation dimension. The Hans Zell Publishers imprint (later renamed Hans Zell Publishing) was launched in 1975, with the first issue of the initially quarterly ABPR. At its inception, the imprint also undertook representation and distribution for a small number of African publishers, including Ravan Press from South Africa and the East African Literature Bureau (now Kenya Literature Bureau).

In parallel, Zell initiated several other key reference publications, including the *Journal of Commonwealth literature* (acquired from Oxford University Press and now published by Sage) and *Current Contents Africa*, edited for the University Library of Frankfurt. His first book title was *The African Book World & Press: a directory/Répertoire du livre et de la presse en Afrique*, published in 1977, with separate editions in the United States, France and Germany. This comprehensive directory of African book professionals was followed by three subsequent editions, firmly establishing Zell as a pioneer in documenting African publishing.

These directories were complemented by ABPR, which provided regular updates and critical analyses on African publishing. In the same vein, Zell played a crucial role in the publication of *The Book Trade of the World, Vol. IV: Africa* (1984), a comprehensive study of books and the press in Africa coordinated by successive Frankfurt Book Fair directors, Sigfried Taubert and Peter Weidhaas. This volume, a landmark work on the African book market with no equivalent to date, analysed the publishing sectors of each African country, offering a synthesis of the challenges and developments in the industry across the continent. Noteworthy for its exhaustive scope, this study provided a rare and detailed panorama of the African book industry at a time when such information was scarce and scattered. The work was complemented by Zell's detailed introduction and substantial bibliography, which contextualized the data on the African publishing industry.

The publications in both ABPR and *The Book Trade of the World* reflect Hans Zell's unwavering commitment to documenting and analysing African publishing, making it accessible to an international audience and supporting the sector's development

initiatives. The thematic diversity and breadth of Zell's contributions to African publishing are indisputable. His meticulous work and multidimensional approach shed light on the challenges, opportunities and history of African publishing, while offering practical solutions and essential tools for industry professionals.

With *The African Studies Companion*, published in several editions (the first in 1989, last in 2006), Zell produced an exhaustive map of information sources on Africa, encompassing databases, electronic resources, and print publications. This guide was praised for its relevance and utility in African studies. Among his other landmark works is *Publishing, Books and Reading in Sub-Saharan Africa: a critical bibliography* (2008), a foundational entry into Zell's body of work. This critical database, with over 2,500 annotated entries, provided in-depth analyses of publications on book development in Africa, supported by an online version updated for several years.

Zell was also an active participant in influential advisory committees, including the International Advisory Board of *Logos: Journal of the World Publishing Community* (1990–2000) and the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* at the University of Toronto (1993–2010). Additionally, he contributed to the *International Encyclopaedia of Book Publishing* (1995), reinforcing his reputation as a leading authority in international publishing. Earlier, he lent his expertise to the *MLA Annual Bibliography* (1973–1980) as a specialist in African literatures and edited the *Africana Library Journal* (1969–1970) in the United States as part of the Africana project.

Through his publications, Zell consistently advocated for the autonomous development of African publishing. This commitment is particularly evident in publications such as *Publishing and Book Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1996), where he identified structural constraints and proposed strategies to strengthen local capacities. He also tackled strategic issues in practical guides such as *Book Marketing and Promotion: a handbook of good practice* (2001), aimed at helping publishers and NGOs in developing countries improve the visibility and distribution of their works.

Zell also explored the impact of digital transformation in publications such as *Digital Media and African Publishing* (Zell 2003), where he highlighted both opportunities and challenges for African publishers, and in the pioneering article, 'The internet, e-commerce, and Africa's book professions' (Zell 2001). More recently he published 'Digital vs print resources at African university institutions: a discussion document' (Zell 2020), which examined the growing influence of digital resources in African academic institutions.

His commitment to inclusivity extended to publishing studies on African-language publishing, exemplified by his essay 'Publishing in African Languages: a review of the literature' (Zell 2018). This work fostered dialogue on the viability and necessity of publishing in indigenous languages. Similarly, Zell highlighted the increasing role of women in African publishing through a series of profiles published in *ABPR* (2021–22).

As another example, Hans Zell's exploration on rights in his 1995 study, 'Buying and selling rights: the prospects, and the constraints, for African publishers', holds particular relevance for me today. As a rights practitioner myself, working extensively across Africa, Zell's insights represent a milestone and resonate deeply with my current focus on promoting Heinemann's African Writers Series towards francophone African publishers and dealing rights with African publishers. (Zell 1995)

Zell's works, bibliographies, and reports have become foundational references for researchers, publishers, and policymakers. Among his most notable contributions are

his chronologies on African publishing development and annual reviews of literature on African books, published under the direction of Cécile Lomer in *ABPR* (2015–23). These analyses offer critical, systematic perspectives on the sector's progress and challenges.

In 2015, as noted above, I had the privilege of co-authoring with Zell the two-part article, 'Book donation programmes for Africa: time for a reappraisal?', published in *African Research and Documentation* (Zell and Thierry 2015). This in-depth study examined the complexity and controversies surrounding book donation programmes in anglophone and francophone Africa. It aimed to provide a nuanced critique of their impact on local book industries and the relevance of donated materials, presenting detailed profiles of various organizations active in sub-Saharan Africa.

Regarding ABC again, Zell's involvement extended beyond its foundation and initial development. He consistently chronicled ABC's progress in his publications, such as his 2019 article, 'Publishing in Africa: where are we now? An update for 2019' (Zell 2019), which analysed contemporary challenges in African publishing. For ABC's thirtieth anniversary in 2020, he hosted Justin Cox's essay, 'African Books Collective: 30 years of providing visibility for African books' (Cox 2019).

Zell's most recent publication, as of this writing, appeared just weeks ago: "Action plans" to support the African book industries: current initiatives in progress, and an inventory of earlier projects', featured in the last 2024 issue of *ABPR* (Zell 2024). This critical analysis examines current efforts to support Africa's book industries while cataloguing earlier projects (1969–2024). It highlights the persistent challenges in implementing such initiatives and reflects on the consequences of discontinued efforts.

It seems fitting to conclude this overview by acknowledging the recognition Zell has received for his unparalleled work. Among his accolades is the Conover-Porter Award by the Africana Librarians Council (ALC) of the US African Studies Association (ASA) for outstanding achievements in Africana bibliography and reference work: in 1984 for *A New Reader's Guide to African Literature* and (jointly) in 1994 for the fourth edition of *African Books in Print/Livres africains disponibles*. Publications by Hans Zell Publishers have also been winners or joint winners of this award on five occasions: in 1988, 1990, 1992, 1996, and 1998. Additionally, in May 2002, Zell received the African Publishers' Network (APNET) Tenth Anniversary Award of Recognition for his support of African publishing.

In the end, for Hans Zell, identifying a career 'high point' remains elusive. 'It's a bit like a rollercoaster', he remarked in 2018. 'There are notable successes, but also disappointments' (Williams 2018). In 1980, Hans Zell Publishers' catalogue was acquired by K. G. Saur Verlag, a leading European reference publisher. Under this new ownership, Zell continued to expand the imprint. In 1989, K. G. Saur was acquired by Butterworths, part of Reed International, becoming 'Hans Zell Publishers, a division of Bowker-Saur'. During this period the catalogue grew to include reference works on human rights and migration. However, in 1997, Bowker-Saur/Reed Reference Publishing discontinued Hans Zell Publishers, deeming the catalogue misaligned with its evolving portfolio. Three journals – *ABPR*, *International African Bibliography*, and *African Studies Abstracts* – were sold to K. G. Saur, and Zell briefly collaborated with James Currey Publishers in Oxford from 2000 to 2002.

Returning to his roots as an independent publisher, Zell established himself in a remote village in the Scottish Highlands. Despite challenging market conditions,

declining sales, and an average print run dropping from 1,500 to just 300 copies annually, he persevered. His standout titles included Aaron Segal's *An Atlas of International Migration* (1993), reprinted multiple times with rights sold in China. In African studies, *The African Studies Companion: a guide to information sources*, published in four editions between 1989 and 2006, remained a consistent success. Reflecting on his journey, Zell candidly noted that while the quality and vision of an independent publisher are crucial, they do not always guarantee commercial success:

I believe any small independent publisher must try to anticipate and respond to market needs and focus on definite market niches. They must be perceptive to new ideas, set a high standard, and seek to build for their imprint a reputation of excellence. They must create awareness and motivation to buy their products, promote the list as vigorously and as extensively as their marketing resources permit, and provide an efficient fulfilment and customer service. Unfortunately, it must also be added that high standards and publishing vision do not necessarily translate into good sales, nor do highly favourable reviews or honours necessarily generate any significant orders. So small may be beautiful, but actually making a living from a small publishing operation is quite another matter. (Williams 2018)

When I crossed paths with James Currey in London in 2013, during a conference dinner, I mentioned Hans Zell to him. I still remember his spontaneous reaction: 'Zell is one of those people whose career I have always admired.'

A living legacy, looking towards the future

As I must inevitably bring this tribute, full of sincere emphasis and likely to be detested by Hans, to a close, I would like simply to express that the legacy of his work lies not only in his writings or in the archives he generously offered to Ghana, Nigeria, or Kenya, nor even in his editorial and professional accomplishments. It also resides in the spirit he has always conveyed: that of an insatiable curiosity and an unwavering determination to make knowledge rigorously accessible. While some of his online projects are no longer available today, he continues to develop an open access space around his publications on his widely visited Academia.edu profile: <https://independent.academia.edu/HansZell>. His influence and new insights continue to nourish the reflections and practices of book professionals and scholars on Africa across the world. It was in direct continuity with this dynamic that Zell, together with Zimbabwean publisher Roger Stringer and South African publisher Colleen Higgs, created the Facebook group, Book Publishing in Africa, in 2011. This space, dedicated to book publishing professionals – including those in scholarly and academic journal publishing – as well as bookselling and media professionals, and authors interested in the African publishing and book trade has progressively grown into a large community, now comprising approximately 5,700 members.

I would also like to highlight that Hans Zell is a pioneer in adopting digital tools for bibliography and publishing in Africa. His self-learning guide for online research (Zell 2011) – which highlights resources tailored to local (Scottish) needs – is a concrete example of his commitment to innovate while respecting the realities of users. This

sense of adaptation, methodical curiosity, and foresight makes him a visionary in a field that is constantly evolving and often difficult to map and study.

Beyond his publications, open access dynamics and social media, Hans Zell created a community of interest around African publishing. Through his writings, involvements, and desire to encourage collaboration, he laid the foundations for a lasting dialogue between researchers, publishing stakeholders, and institutions. It is this spirit of dialogue and transmission that perhaps represents Hans Zell's greatest legacy. Paul Sturges writes about him:

The overall contribution to research made by Hans Zell Publishers cannot be undervalued by any critical comment on any individual volume, but in fact the volumes offer little, if any, scope for negative comment. The breadth and strength of its bibliographies and research guides are a marvellous contribution to knowledge of a continent which is distinctly difficult to research. Its compilers are from the ranks of the most distinguished Africana bibliographers and librarians, and the resulting products are of the highest quality. (Sturges [n.d.](#))

Through his work, Hans Zell teaches us that geographical and cultural boundaries are not limits, but bridges. His work illustrates the idea that the book is much more than a tool for knowledge: it is a lever for development, a link between peoples, and a path to social transformation in a democratic and interconnected world. I thus echo the words of Michael Wise, who wrote about Hans's bibliographies:

Each of these bibliographies, which are published in the several series of almost uniquely valuable Africana bibliographies from Hans Zell, marks a milestone in the development of literary, artistic and social affairs in Sub-Saharan Africa. (Wise [n.d.](#))

Even today, his example remains an invitation to continue this essential mission: to document the editorial diversity of the African continent not on the fringes of the global book industry, but as an integral part, contributing to its balance, to the 'bibliodiversity' that is so needed in our societies. His efforts, though recognized by part of the academic and professional community, deserve to be more widely celebrated. In this sense, paying tribute to Hans Zell is not only to honour a life of exceptional dedication, but also to remind us of the importance of transmission and cooperation in a world where knowledge remains the key to progress and mutual respect. For Hans Zell and his sixty-one years of publishing, I say 'Bravo'. I now look forward to celebrating all those yet to come, with a heartfelt 'THANK YOU, HANS'.

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