

INTRODUCTION

Hans Zell: bibliographer of African publishing – introduction

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When I started working in African publishing in 2001, recently graduated from university, the name of Hans Zell loomed large. Living in Scotland, his name was evoked by my colleagues with reverence, as an authority on all matters African publishing and books, particularly for his role in the founding of African Books Collective (ABC). He had an intimidatingly long list of publications to his name. Over the years, I have come to know Hans, and regularly correspond with him, seeking his advice on my own work.

Hans was born a Swiss German in Zurich in January 1940 where he trained and worked as a bookseller. By the time he was thirty, Hans had worked in publishing roles in three continents: Europe (Switzerland, Sweden and the UK), the USA (New York), and Africa (Sierra Leone). He then spent a formative period in Nigeria in the early 1970s, setting up the University of Ife Press and the Ife bookshop, before settling in Oxford in the UK from the mid-1970s for what was the central part of his career, running Hans Zell Publishers, and subsequently African Books Collective, before moving to Scotland in the mid-1990s from where he continued to work as an editor and bibliographer of African publishing.

In 2008, Hans wrote, robustly and with revealing candour, that ‘As a Swiss with no colonial or ancestral guilt, I don’t need to compensate for the sins of my forefathers’ (Zell 2008: 189). There can be no space for soft-peddling European colonial legacy in Africa (Odinkalu and Sambu 2024) and it may be questionable for Hans to claim that he is outside of the broader European colonial legacy. But by disavowing identity politics, Hans was making a point about African agency: ‘... it is clear that only Africa’s leaders and its people can solve the continent’s enormous problems ...’ (*ibid.*) This stance had guided a lifetime’s work in African publishing and reference works.

Hans became *the* bibliographer of African publishing and writing, a line that ran through his work from training and working in bookselling to his later-stage career. He has done field-setting and pioneering work that has helped to define the study of African publishing.

Raphaël Thierry pays tribute to Hans’s multiple and multifaceted contributions to African publishing and scholarship. He makes clear that Hans always assumed the widest possible role in encouraging the ‘organic development’ of African publishing. In 1973, Hans coordinated the International Conference on Publishing and Book

Development in Africa. This was an event of over a hundred attendees, the majority of whom were African publishers, booksellers, librarians, publishing consultants, writers, academics, literary critics, and institutional representatives. The proceedings were published as *Publishing in Africa in the Seventies* (Oluwasanmi *et al.* 1975). As Thierry notes, this became the first major work dedicated to the structural challenges of publishing in Africa. It stimulated further contributions by authors and commentators on African books and publishing, including Philip Altbach, Alain Ricard, Robert Estivals and Walter Bgoya.

This was followed by consultancies provided to UNESCO and the Frankfurt Book Fair. Hans was instrumental in establishing the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa that ran from 1980–2009, and gave its first prize to Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, subsequently translated into English as *So Long a Letter*, the first work of African literature to be translated across the globe. This was the first real work of African literature I read in French (in West Africa) in 2001, aged twenty-two, and was soon to be followed by many other 'francophone' authors. I'm sure that that powerful reading experience came to influence my own career choices.

Hans was also involved in the International African Institute (IAI) hosted at SOAS University of London, where I now work. As well as being a notable publisher in African studies, Hans was a key authority and advisor. Eminent actors in the 1980s would seek his counsel about African publishing, including the historian Michael Crowder, a friend of Hans Zell, who had a strong interest in journal and monograph publishing. Hans and Michael Crowder were both at Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, from 1965–67, where Crowder was Director of the African Studies Department and Hans was running the university bookshop; later both were at Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo) University in Nigeria in the 1970s in similar roles.¹

Carol Priestley was involved in various initiatives at the IAI to support the dissemination of African periodicals, including the African Journals Distribution Programme, before establishing the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publishing (INASP). She also sought Hans's advice on African journals. James and Clare Currey consulted Hans about how they could set up what became the James Currey Publishing company in 1984 (Jay, this issue, 120).

Hans contributed too to a symposium on 'The Book Famine in Africa' convened by Michael Crowder and held at the IAI/LSE (London School of Economics) in London on 14 October 1985. The symposium was an event associated with Bookweek Africa, crucial in the establishment of ABC (see Jay, this issue, 120–1).

It was a time of crisis in African higher education and publishing, as well as starvation in Ethiopia, later called out as 'famine crimes' by de Waal (1997). Hans wrote about the connection between 'starving African children on our tv screens ... and another form of starvation, largely unnoticed and receiving little media attention ... – book famine' (Zell 1987).

Hans Zell ... 'Having read an advance copy of the report on the Symposium he could confirm that the problems faced by his company – specialising in reference works on Africa and the Third World – were very similar to those described by other publishers active in the African studies field ... the

¹ Hans Zell, personal communication, 8 January 2025.

pattern in the decline in sales was also very similar ... this was due largely to the virtual collapse of the African markets'.²

Hans was particularly concerned about the effects in African universities of what Crowder called the 'two-way process': the shortage of journals and books supplied to the continent and the contraction of the African book market, as well as the lack of availability of African-published periodicals and books outside the continent.³

Whereas this situation was unfortunate for publishing companies, it was critical for the African book world at large, with many university and public libraries having been unable to buy any new books over the past two or three years, much less maintain their periodicals collections. Many parts of Africa now presented a picture of a bookless society.⁴

Hans would go on to write and publish widely in journals and media on books and publishing, raising awareness of the topic of the 'bookless society' (Zell 1987) and Africa as the 'neglected continent' (Zell 1990).

A key theme emerging from the articles in this issue is of Hans as an advisor, informant and collaborator for generations of researchers working on African publishing. Raphaël Thierry, Angus Crichton and Elizabeth le Roux, following Peter Limb of an earlier generation, make clear how vital Hans was to their research projects.

Invoking the crucial question of (lacking) evidence or 'data' on publishing and the book trade in Africa, repeatedly raised by Hans, le Roux also writes of reciprocal working with Hans: 'Contact with Hans over the years has helped me to think through how my academic research is relevant to modern publishing practices ... I've appreciated his openness to including more historical sources in his databases.'

Le Roux further highlights Zell's work of compiling and disseminating detailed bibliographies:

Zell's critical bibliographies of scholarship on publishing and the book trade in Africa have been invaluable in my own research ... They have also shown me how significant and influential even a partial set of data can be – and that you can only be aware of the gaps when you know what already exists. I am grateful for Hans for giving me access to the bibliographies ... as this enabled me to broaden the scope of my research ...

The theme of Hans as publisher of bibliographies is taken up by others, notably Limb and John McIlwaine, whose bibliographical studies on the continent came out with Hans Zell Publishers. Hans's strength was as a bibliographer; as for actual research – data collection, interviews, triangulation, analysis – he was reliant on working with others. He was working on the repository part of the 'Publishing and Book Culture in

² Report of the Proceedings of a One-day Symposium on The Book Famine in Africa, held on 14 October 1985 at the Lionel Robbins Building [London]. See also 'The book famine in Africa'. IAI Symposium, *African Book Publishing Record* XI (4): 195, 1985. This journal was also established by Hans Zell (see Limb, this issue).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Africa' project with Caroline Davis in the early 2020s that was aborted because of illness.⁵

John McIlwaine writes:

I naturally associated Hans with his publications relating to African publishers and the book trade and not with bibliographies. And he had never published anything by me – indeed I had not yet published anything very substantial. But here was I [in 1992] offering him a huge tome, a bibliography which I was entitling 'Reference works relating to Africa containing inter alia sections on Handbooks, Atlases and Gazetteers, Biographical works, Collections of statistics etc.' ... he took away the typescript and ... down the road he obviously decided to take a punt on me and offered me a contract. It appeared as *Africa: a guide to reference material* (McIlwaine 1993). In 1994 it was awarded the Library Association (of the UK) Besterman medal 'for an outstanding bibliography'. ... Three years later came my *Writings on African Archives*, published for the Standing Conference on Africa (SCOLMA) (McIlwaine 1996). The association with SCOLMA was because I had initially published much of the content in SCOLMA's journal *African Research and Documentation*. This volume was joint winner of the Conover-Porter Award of the African Studies Association (of the USA) 'for the most outstanding achievement in Africana bibliography & reference works'.⁶

Crichton and Enyegue document the significant donation of almost 400 volumes of African studies publications to the Jesuit Historical Institute in Nairobi, one of several such donations made by Hans to institutions in the continent. The generosity of Hans to move resources to where he judged them to be most productive and needed is a theme that comes out strongly in these papers, as well as his own early commitment to open access publishing as a vital step to ensuring the widest accessibility of his work in the African continent itself. Enyegue puts it thus:

Hans Zell has greatly enhanced the visibility of African Studies worldwide. ... Zell recognized early on the importance of digitization for the dissemination of African documentation.

Enyegue makes a further point about Zell's wider contribution to African studies:

Zell has shed light on the historical evolution of the publishing industry in Africa. This in itself is an important contribution to the historiography of Africa as a whole.

Hans Zell's living legacy – African Books Collective

Hans's steadfast belief in and commitment to making an autonomous African publishing sector a reality over a career spanning more than sixty years rings out through his own published work, a bibliography of which we are publishing with this issue. Arguably, his most important living legacy is the survival and continuation of

⁵ <https://www.hanszell.co.uk/repository.htm>

⁶ John McIlwaine, correspondence, 25 November 2024.

African Books Collective, an organization he helped establish over a protracted period in the 1980s that started trading in 1990. Earlier on, in the 1970s, Hans had identified the issues he sought to address through establishing ABC:

Hans Zell ... made some hard criticism of indigenous publishers and booksellers in Africa. ... Zell has spoken out, as he has on several past occasions, against the 'notorious unbusinesslike' methods of African publishers and booksellers which are a major hindrance to the effective development of the indigenous African book industry. Although many African publishers operate on shoestring budgets it is essential that they do justice to the efficient marketing of academic works otherwise there will be no real challenge to the British publishers operating so successfully in Africa nor will they attract the writings of major African authors (Larby 1977: 434).

Hans has scrupulously documented the 'failures' in African publishing: 'a field that is more characterized by lamentation than celebration' (Crichton, this issue, 114). Indeed a recent paper is dedicated to tracking "Action plans" to support the African book industries', both the fate of initiatives established in recent years as well as earlier projects from 1969. In summing up, Hans notes that

Over the last ten years or more there have been an ambitious range of new initiatives, elaborate action plans, and mega-conferences to address the challenges and realising the opportunities for the African book industries ... some of these major, mostly high-level action plans have yet to be implemented ... over the past 30 or more years, many pan-African or regional organizations, programmes, and other initiatives in the book sector have failed, despite their best intentions (Zell 2024a: 316).

Hans has discussed at length, and repeatedly, the reasons for such failures. Significant in his analysis has been the undue or over-reliance of African publishing organizations on (mainly European) donor or philanthropic (often from the USA) funding. He asks 'What is there to show for all the effort and donor money poured into African publishing?' (Zell 2009: 80). He presented a case study of the African Publishers Network (APNET) concluding that although money may have been wasted, 'donors' expectations for APNET to become fully self-sustainable have always been unrealistic' (*ibid.*: 81).

I share Hans's frustration about donor and philanthropic funding spent on well-intentioned but poorly thought through or unrealistic programmes, repetitious with those that have failed in the past, especially when there are huge resources gaps and real funding needs in African publishing (Kitchen and Mills 2024). Aligned with Hans's position and drawing on de Jong and Valente-Quinn's (2018) apt descriptor, 'infrastructures of utopia', Mills *et al.* (2024) suggest that '[a]mbitious open science "manifestos", "transformative charters" and "global diamond alliances" may become tomorrow's ruined utopias'. Instead, the co-authors of this article call for 'realism' in the 'building of publishing infrastructures' (*ibid.*).

ABC did manage to transition from receiving donor funding over many years to an autonomous model of support for African based publishers. It has done so through operationalizing the digital revolution in publishing from the early 2000s (Ail *et al.* 2024). However, based in the North, and with a publishing and book trading model

attached, it is possibly a unique case in the African context. Hans raised the first grant from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) that helped get ABC off the ground (Jay, this issue, 120–1).

Discussions with Hans

In the spirit of the critique that Hans encouraged, below I make a few comments about Hans's work and legacy.

Textbooks and multinational publishing

There is a longstanding and complex debate about the place of multinational versus independent publishing in the African continent, at least since the period of independence; see for example Gedin (1991) versus Hill (1992); see also Davis (2020). These earlier and historical accounts tend to focus on textbook and literary publishing; a more recent discussion in Mills *et al.* (2024), that is primarily concerned with contemporary journal publishing, addresses 'global science' versus 'African focused scholarly ecosystems'.

Hans has contributed to this debate, not least through his scrupulous documentation and support for independent African publishing. However, at times, and doubtless frustrated by circular arguments about textbook policies and a lack of action, Hans would declare things like '[t]ired old arguments like putting the blame on domination by the multinationals are no longer valid' (Zell 2008: 189). More recently, Hans has admitted with some resignation that the multinationals are something 'we have to learn to live with'.⁷

The last point is irrefutable. However, there is a connection between colonialism and capitalism, and the shifts in publishing brought on by digitization and commercial consolidation that have empowered the multinational commercial journals publishers, both established publishers like Elsevier and Taylor & Francis, as well as 'new challenger' publishers (Kitchen *et al.* 2024).

African publishers

Debating the multinational issue with the Tanzanian publisher and writer Walter Bgoya, Hans writes:

Bgoya ... contends that publishing in Africa remains an enclave industry serving foreign multinationals and their joint ventures, 'which are actually comprador companies, established to legitimize the former's presence and exploitation' (Zell 2008: 190).

Hans describes the significant achievements of Bgoya's own publishing house, Mkuki na Nyota:

Over 150 titles in English and Kiswahili are on offer here, and a most impressive list it is too, of academic, educational, general and children's titles ...

⁷ Hans Zell, personal communication, 8 January 2025.

He asks:

What's going on here? How is it possible that such an enterprising indigenous publisher can exist, and apparently prosper with a constantly expanding and diverse list, when the market is still completely dominated by the multinationals?

But it is precisely such contradictions, still in play in African publishing since independence, that are deserving of further analysis. We know that the achievements of Mkuki na Nyota and other independent African publishers have been against the odds, and at some personal cost. Henry Chakava fought for the 'indigenisation' of East African Educational Publishers from the British Heinemann and engaged in the wider struggle first against the multinationals, and subsequently against authoritarian rule in Kenya. Chakava quite literally risked his life to publish Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work, even against the author's own advice about his safety (Kamau and Mitambo 2016). Zell himself wrote about Chakava as 'a courageous and highly enterprising publisher who has made a massive and lasting contribution to indigenous publishing and the book trade in Africa' (2024b).

Is it perhaps fair to say that Hans is sometimes unnecessarily negative, or excessively critical, in his analysis of African publishing and publishers? Crichton asserts that given Zell's chronicling of how much has been achieved in African book publishing, his 'lamentations' might amount to a 'balanced perspective' (this issue). But African publishing is not only a topic of academic study, it is a current, everyday practice driven by human actors, often working in very difficult economic conditions, lacking educational, infrastructural and technological resources, 'whose knowledge and dedication make cultural institutions function' (Park *et al.* 2021: 520).

There have been occasional moments where in defending African publishers and their agency Hans has criticized publishers who have for decades worked to further the independent publishing sector in Africa. Francis Nyamnjoh, one of the continent's most prominent academics and publishers, wrote in a non-specialist work aimed at an international audience:

There is little or no publishing of books of interest and relevant to the African majority, and of those that are published, most are by multinational publishers who target the elite few who can read and write European languages . . . (2007, quoted in Zell 2008: 191)

Hans considered this to be 'not only unnecessarily negative but also quite untrue' (*ibid.*: 192), countering that over 100 publishers are currently distributed by ABC. He writes: 'Had Francis Nyamnjoh bothered to consult the subject index of the latest edition of [Zell's] *African Books in Print* he would have discovered a wealth of culturally relevant books . . .'. Crichton (this issue, 114) notes that Hans was always minded to stress that African publishing was not some *terra nullius*, and it remains important to restate this, not least in the academy. But still, African publishers, for the most part constrained by resources, can only partially address the question of publishing in African languages and where responsibility for that lies (Kilolo 2022).

Nyamnjoh points out too that '[t]he disadvantaged African publishers ... do not make enough from textbooks to venture into other aspects of publishing. This calls for policies that protect African publishers against uneven competition with established giants driven primarily by profitability' (2007, quoted in Zell 2008: 191). The specific policies required to protect and prioritize endogenous African publishing amidst global shifts, and how African local and regional publishers can address the competitive advantage of the well-resourced multinationals in the digital age, notably their ongoing dominance of both digital textbook and journal markets, are relevant, though complex, issues worthy of debate.

Conclusion

As Hans has documented comprehensively, much has been achieved in African publishing since the 1970s. A notable positive change, that Hans himself has catalogued, albeit relatively recently (Zell 2021, 2022), has been the increasing involvement of women in African publishing. Hans too has himself supported the careers of women (Jay, this issue, 119–22). But we need to acknowledge that publishing, academia and literature, in Africa and the UK, were from the 1960s until at least the 1990s a male dominated culture. It may be fair too to observe that Hans' single-minded focus on the work of building bibliographies and support for African publishing led to disagreements over understandings of the realities on the ground.

Hans's approach, especially in his later career, was focused on bibliographic contribution, rather than mobilizing a wider research focus on the structural issues, social and working conditions of knowledge producers and publishers, including questions of resourcing for research and journal publishing, and libraries (which Hans has written about), in the continent. These questions are being taken up by others, as for example Hanafi and Arvanitis (2016) call for in relation to studies of knowledge production in the Middle East. Peter Limb (2024), writing in this journal, notes that Zell's 'bleak' analysis of Nigerian university presses prompts wider questions about the state of Nigerian scholarly publishing, how universities in general and journal publishers adapt, and how libraries access scholarly outputs. The political and economic contexts in which Hans and others were working were not, and still are not, easy.

Peers of Hans's generation include, in Africa, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Henry Chakava, and Walter Bgoya; and in the UK, James Currey and Mary Jay, not forgetting Peter Limb in North America. Thanks to the extraordinary and collective efforts of these individuals, those of us working in African studies, literature and publishing today have inherited institutions, organizations, journals and other forums to be able to discuss and take forward their work. We owe it to this pioneering generation of publishers and writers concerned with books on and from Africa to understand their legacy – in what are different times. Our *Festschrift* of essays on Hans Zell is one attempt to do so.

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