

## 1 African Literary Publishing during Decolonisation

Several writers and publishers remarked on the dramatic increase in the publication of African literature in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Nat Nakasa, editor of *The Classic*, referred to ‘a vigorous, almost frantic, search for African writing’;<sup>39</sup> the Ghanaian writer Ellis Ayetey Komey commented that the demand for African literature was outstripping supply;<sup>40</sup> and Diana Athill, editor at André Deutsch, observed that, ‘for a time during the fifties and early sixties it was probably easier for a black writer to get his book accepted by a London publisher, and kindly reviewed thereafter, than it was for a young white person’.<sup>41</sup> Literary traffic also began to flow in multiple directions: whereas under British colonial rule, English literature was largely shipped from the metropolitan centre to the colonial peripheries and very few African writers’ work was published, in the late 1950s and 1960s new opportunities for publication opened up worldwide. As colonial arrangements for publishing began to break down, a vacuum was left which a number of agencies – state and commercial – were keen to occupy, and new alliances were formed. This chapter examines how these transnational networks of African literary publishing operated and intersected in the period of decolonisation.

Before 1957, African literary publishing in English tended to be carried out from London. Initially, this was by London-based religious publishers; for example, the Religious Tract Society published Samuel Ntara’s *Man of Africa* (1934), the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge published Thomas Mofolo’s *The Traveller to the East* (1934), and Joseph Kwame Danquah’s *The Third Woman* (1943) was published by the United Society for Christian Literature. By the mid 1940s, a few small commercial firms in London had published a select number of African writers: Peter Abrahams (Dorothy Crisp and Faber), Amos Tutuola (Faber), Camara Laye (Collins), and Cyprian Ekwensi (Nelson). Lutterworth published a selection of West African short stories, and Stockwell, a small imprint in Ilfracombe, Devon, published Ghanaian poetry and novels in the 1940s and

<sup>39</sup> Nakasa, ‘Comment’, *The Classic*, 1:2, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Komey, ‘Wanted: Creative Writers’, 63. <sup>41</sup> Athill, *Stet*, p. 103.

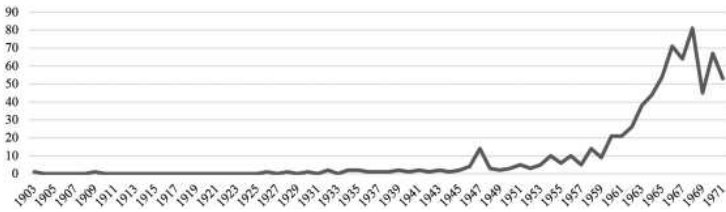


Figure 1 Number of African literary titles in English published worldwide, 1903–72

1950s. Some of these writers, including Abrahams, Laye, and Tutuola, were co-published by the New York publishers Knopf, Grove Press, the Noonday Press, and John Day. Only a handful of works were published in Africa. In South Africa, these included Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (Lovedale, 1930), Herbert Isaac Earnest Dhlomo's *The Girl Who Killed to Save* (Lovedale, 1935), and Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Man Must Live and Other Stories* (African Bookman, 1947); in Accra, the popular novellas of Gilbert A. Sam and J. Beninbengor Blay were published by Gilisam Publishing Syndicate, while Cyprian Ekwensi's short stories were published by Chuks Services in Yaba, Lagos. During the colonial period, African literary publishing in the English language was thus both limited and predominantly London centred.

In the period of decolonisation, there was a striking increase in the number of African literary titles published in the English language, as illustrated in Figure 1.<sup>42</sup> Of the total number of works of African literature published in the period 1900–72, 87 per cent were published after 1957, the year of Ghanaian independence.

This rapid growth in literary publishing was mainly linked to the expansion of British educational publishing in Africa. There was a period of investment in education on the part of the newly independent African governments, and British publishers capitalised on this by setting up branches and subsidiary

<sup>42</sup> I have carried out this quantitative analysis of African literary production between 1900 and 1972, based on bibliographical data gathered by Donald Herdeck in *African Authors*.

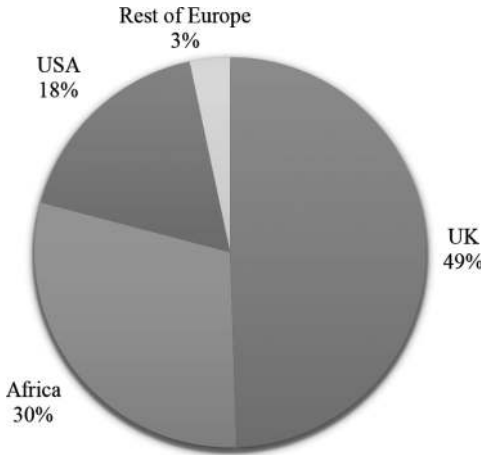


Figure 2 Place of publication of African literary titles in English, 1957–72

companies across the continent. Oxford University Press (OUP) and Longmans converted their sales offices in Nigeria and Kenya to publishing branches or subsidiary companies, and Nelson established publishing branches in Ikeja (near Lagos) and in Nairobi. The British book trade in Africa was strongly supported by the British government, via the British Council and the Arts Council, while international copyright legislation and the post-war publishing trade agreements carved up English-speaking world markets between American and British publishers and helped ensure the maintenance of British publishers' dominance in the former British colonies.<sup>43</sup> This meant that publishers based in Africa were able to obtain rights to distribute a book only nationally rather than internationally; they had to obtain co-publishing arrangements with British or American publishers for their books to be sold internationally, with the result that African authors who sought an international market for their books were compelled to seek a British or American publisher.

These factors led to the persistence of the colonial model of African literary publishing (see Figure 2). Of the 692 African literary titles published

<sup>43</sup> Hensch, *Books as Weapons*, p. 198.

*African Literature and the CIA*

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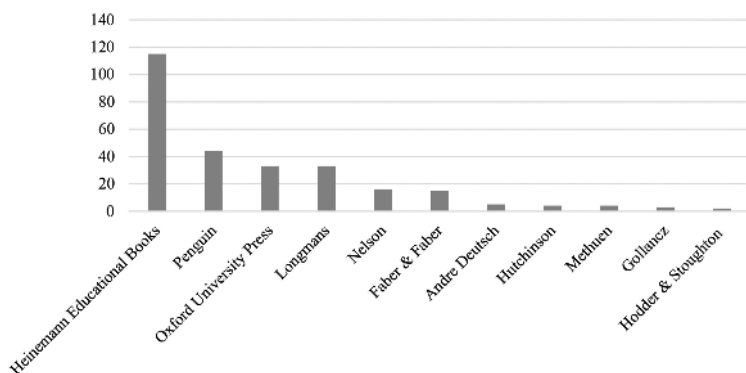


Figure 3 Number of African literary titles in English published by British publishers, 1957–72

in the English language in the period 1957–72, 49 per cent were published in the United Kingdom, 30 per cent in Africa, 18 per cent in the United States, and the remaining 3 per cent in other European countries.

Heinemann Educational Books, by far the most significant of the British publishing firms involved in African literature, published 115 titles in the African Writers Series from 1962 to 1972. In the same period, Penguin published forty-four titles, Longmans and Oxford University Press each published thirty-three, and Nelson published sixteen. By contrast, the output of the more prestigious London literary publishers was more limited. Faber and Faber issued fifteen titles, but Andre Deutsch, Hutchinson, Methuen, Gollancz, and Hodder & Stoughton published only a handful of works of African literature (see Figure 3).

There was also a marked increase in the number of works in English published by African publishers from 1957 to 1972, although they struggled to compete in the face of British and American publishers' dominance in this market. During this period, 30 per cent of new African literary titles were

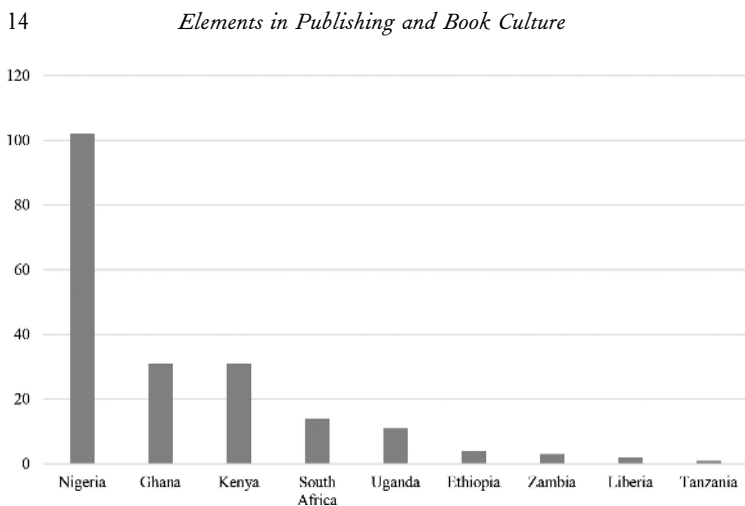


Figure 4 Number of African literary titles in English published by African publishers, 1957–1972 (based on data from Herdeck, *African Authors*)

published in Africa, but the profile across the continent was very uneven. According to Herdeck's bibliography, a total of 102 new literary titles were issued in Nigeria, 31 titles in Ghana and Kenya, 14 in South Africa, 11 in Uganda, and a negligible number in Ethiopia, Zambia, Liberia, and Tanzania (Figure 4).

During the period of decolonisation, American publishers also mounted a challenge to the British monopoly over this market but, as Figure 5 shows, this was limited to a very small number of publishing companies. Collier-Macmillan was the leading American publisher of African literature, issuing twelve titles including works by Camara Laye, Wole Soyinka, Peter Abrahams, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; Doubleday published the work of Legson Kariya, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Kofi Awoonor; Hill & Wang published the plays of Wole Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi, James Henshaw, and Henry Ofori; Crowell published the poetry of Cosmo Pieterse and James Rubadiri, and a play by Joseph Okpaku; while Simon & Schuster published a novel by Bessie Head. The majority of these American publishers

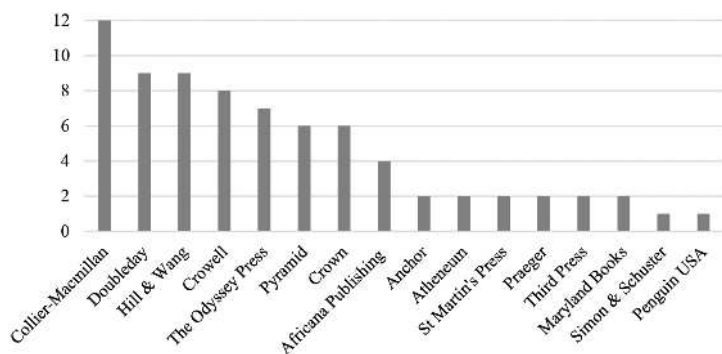


Figure 5 Number of African literary titles in English published by US publishers, 1957–72

were involved in the publication of co-editions with London publishers, or reprints of works that had already been published in Europe, and their attention was focused on a few star African authors.

This brief overview of the publishing environment for African literature demonstrates that there was a significant increase in African literary publishing after decolonisation. African and American firms increasingly competed for a share in this growing market, but British publishing firms continued to be the dominant players. I turn now to assess the impact of CIA interventions on this persistent colonial model of African literary production.

### *'A Missionary Move'*

In 1980, Jack Thompson, executive director of the Farfield Foundation, was questioned by Peter Benson about the reasons for the CIA's covert operation in African literature. Thompson's response was revealing:

Our particular interest was in literary people ... We thought it would be important to aid them because it seemed to us, on the basis of the political experience of other

countries, that literary intellectuals had been important. Our interest was in establishing an independent publishing program . . . In those innocent days, incredible as it may seem, my theory was that if they were intelligent they were good . . . I think now, looking back on it, that it was probably in the long run, indirectly and obscurely, part of American imperialism. Americans tended to take over these markets from England, but I certainly didn't know that then. As I look back on it, it was basically a missionary move. I would oppose it now. But it seemed like a good idea at the time . . . There were no strings attached whatever.<sup>44</sup>

Thompson posits two key reasons for the CIA operation. First, its main concern was political volatility in Africa and the need for a stabilising intellectual elite; he frames it as an attempt to create a community of 'literary intellectuals' by offering them funding with 'no strings attached'. Secondly, he claims that this was an act of 'American imperialism', particularly in terms of its support of an 'independent publishing program' and its foray into British book markets. Thompson's arguments raise important questions about the underlying rationale for the CIA's investment in African literature and culture, and the extent to which it affected African literary production.

The CIA's covert involvement in African literature was orchestrated jointly by the Congress of Cultural Freedom in Paris and the Farfield Foundation in New York. Its initial 'missionary move', in the words of Thompson, involved a series of tours of Africa; for example, Thompson himself visited South Africa where he met Lewis Nkosi and Nat Nakasa in 1960.<sup>45</sup> This was followed by a series of cross-continental workshops, conferences, prizes, and events for African writers and publishers, by which the CIA actively cultivated connections with the literary elite and intelligentsia. Potential leaders were identified and offered funding to support their existing literary magazines or to establish new ones. In certain cases, they were also offered funding to establish hubs for African literature in English across the continent. A number of African writers were provided

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, in Benson, *Black Orpheus*, p. 36. <sup>45</sup> Benson, *Black Orpheus*, p. 35.

with opportunities for publication in the magazines funded by the CCF, as well as by CCF-funded book publishers, and close associations were formed with commercial publishers in the United Kingdom and the United States for anthologising and republishing these works. The result was an interwoven system of literary patronage and support, and the creation of a system of literary hubs that were financially dependent on the CIA.

The first of these hubs was in Ibadan, Nigeria. This was set up by Ulli Beier, a German extra-mural lecturer based at Ibadan University, after he attended the first Africa-related event of the CCF, the 1956 World Congress of African Writers and Artists in Paris, organised by Mercer Cook, the CCF's first Director of African Services. Inspired by the event, Beier decided on his return to Ibadan to launch the magazine *Black Orpheus*, which he did in 1957, with the objective of supporting and publishing African writers from all parts of Africa, as well as from North and South America. The magazine was at first edited by Beier, together with Wole Soyinka and Ezekiel Mphahlele, and initially it was supported by the General Publications Section of the Ministry of Education, Ibadan; a government organisation set up to promote western Nigerian literature. When the funding ran out in 1960, Mphahlele applied to John Thompson of the Farfield Foundation for further funding, which was granted. Beier was then invited to Paris to meet Michael Josselson, international director of Farfield, and was offered further financial support for the establishment of the Ibadan-based Mbari Writers and Artists Club, an arts centre with a theatre, gallery, library, and publishing imprint.<sup>46</sup> This was established in 1961 as a meeting place for young poets, writers, and intellectuals like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, and Christopher Okigbo, with Mphahlele as its founder and first president. Mbari became the blueprint for the CCF's plan for seemingly decolonised African literature, and the plan was to expand this model across the continent.

Mphahlele took over the role of director of the African Services of the CCF after Cook's resignation in 1961. Based in Paris and working with John Hunt, executive director of the CCF, he led the expansion of the CCF's Africa programme into South and East Africa, beginning with a 'tour throughout Africa ... to look for writers and artists who need to be

<sup>46</sup> Coleman, *Liberal Conspiracy*, pp. 203–4.



sponsored and should be acquainted with Mbari'.<sup>47</sup> A major milestone was the Conference of African Writers of English Expression organised by Mphahlele at Makerere College in Kampala, Uganda, in June 1962. This brought together forty-five delegates to discuss the future of African literature in English, including African authors, academics, publishers, and broadcasters. Invited delegates included James Ngũgĩ (later Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Alex La Guma, Bloke Modisane, and American guests of honour Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison. A number of publishers attended, including editors of African literary magazines Neville Rubín (*The New African*) and Rajat Neogy (*Transition*), book publishers including Andre Deutsch and Van Milne from Thomas Nelson, as well as Roger Norrington from Oxford University Press, and a representative from Longmans. Only three of the invited participants were women: Rebecca Njau, Grace Ogot, and Efua Sutherland.<sup>48</sup> The conference was an important step in establishing a public forum for the debate and discussion of African literature in English.<sup>49</sup> None of the participants were aware of the CIA's funding of the conference; indeed, Ngũgĩ wrote, 'This secret manipulation was typical of the Cold War environment in which the conference and the decolonisation of Africa took place . . . For me and the other participants it was simply a gathering of writers'.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, he wrote that the CIA funding of Makerere was evidence that 'certain directions in our cultural political, and economic choices can be masterminded from the metropolitan centres of imperialism'.<sup>51</sup>

Mphahlele's attempts to build up the work of the CCF in East Africa proved to be more of a struggle. In 1962 he set up the Chemchemi Cultural Centre in Nairobi, on the same model as Mbari, with the aim to encourage new writers in Kenya.<sup>52</sup> However, it was slow to develop. After visiting

<sup>47</sup> Mphahlele, 'Mbari: First Anniversary', p. 7. <sup>48</sup> 1.3, TC/HRC.

<sup>49</sup> An earlier conference funded by the CIA, which aimed to strengthen universities in West Africa, was the Inter-University Cooperation in West Africa (Freetown) in December 1961.

<sup>50</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Birth of a Dream Weaver*, p. 139.

<sup>51</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 30 n. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Coleman, *Liberal Conspiracy*, p. 205.

Chemchemi in February 1965, Dennis Duerden of the Transcription Centre in London recounted its various shortcomings to John Thompson: there were, in his view, too many rival cultural and arts centres in Nairobi, and he worried that there was little creative inspiration in Kenya compared to Nigeria and Ghana. He also considered Mphahlele to be bureaucratic in his approach, and thought his big house and large salary aroused local suspicion.<sup>53</sup> Eventually, the CCF decided to stop funding the centre, and Mphahlele had to concede defeat.<sup>54</sup> It was evidently regarded as overfunded and inauthentic: an illusion of independence and autonomy was evidently vital to the success of these CIA initiatives.

The model of literary and cultural investment established by the CCF appeared to reverse the colonial flows of literary traffic from the metropole to Africa. New literary hubs were created across Africa that promoted local management and local literary production, and, where successful, they gave an illusion of the creation of a decentralised, avant-garde small-press culture, but, as the experience of Chemchemi shows, the reliance of these hubs on American money and influence had to be carefully concealed.

### *'A New Publishing Program'*

After Makerere, the CIA funded a number of literary magazines across the continent. At the conference, Mphahlele invited several of the existing magazine editors to apply for sponsorship. Rajat Neogy, a Ugandan-born Bengali, had launched his cultural and literary magazine *Transition* in November 1961 from Kampala, shortly before Ugandan independence, but after four issues he ran out of money. He applied to the CCF and received funding for the following six years, although he complained constantly about the 'shoe string' finances of the CCF.<sup>55</sup> *Transition* became one of the foremost literary-political magazines in Africa, with the largest circulation of all the CCF magazines in Africa, reaching 12,000 worldwide, including 3,000 in the United States.<sup>56</sup> Other literary magazines that received funding from the CCF were *The New*

<sup>53</sup> Letter, Duerden to Thompson, 9 February 1965, 23.4, TC/HRC.

<sup>54</sup> Manganyi, *Exiles and Homecomings*, p. 236.

<sup>55</sup> Letter, Neogy to Duerden, 20 June 1963, 17.17, TC/HRC.

<sup>56</sup> Coleman, *Liberal Conspiracy*, p. 191.