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A circular graphic containing a stylized map of Africa. The map is divided into several regions, each filled with a different pattern and color: green with a leaf pattern, red with a dot pattern, yellow with a dot pattern, and brown with a dot pattern. To the right of the map is a smaller version of the "AFRICA *SPEAKS" logo. Below the map and logo, the text "THE SECOND ROUNDTABLE CONSULTATION 2024" is written in red, and "5th -9th March Nairobi, Kenya" is written in red and grey.

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**CONFERENCE
PAPERS**

DISCOVERABILITY OF CHRISTIAN AUTHORS' BOOKS

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Leap Publishers & AfricanBooks.com

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Abstract

This paper delves into the complexities and opportunities within the global publishing arena for African authors and publishers. Focusing on African literature, particularly in the Christian publishing sector, it examines historical challenges, the role of traditional Western publishers, and the decline of prominent platforms like the African Writers Series. Through a comparative lens, it highlights disparities between traditional and self-publishing models, emphasising hurdles faced by African authors. Moreover, it addresses distribution challenges within Africa, including piracy and funding limitations, while showcasing initiatives aimed at improvement. In the realm of Christian publishing, unique obstacles hinder African authors' access to international recognition and global distribution. Yet, the paper underscores the potential for collaboration and adaptation to enhance visibility. Ultimately, it advocates for collective action and infrastructure investment to navigate challenges and seize opportunities, empowering African Christian voices to enrich the global literary landscape.

Key Words; Discoverability, Visibility, Traditional Publishing, Self-publishing, Christian Publishing, African Literature, eBook, Print Book, (Book) Distribution

INTRODUCTION

The issue of African books and their visibility in global markets has been a longstanding concern for African authors, publishers, and readers spanning multiple generations. With the onset of independence across Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a new wave of renowned African writers emerged. However, Africa's publishing industry has only existed for about six or seven decades¹ as a whole continent, lagging nearly a century behind its Western counterparts in establishing comprehensive publishing, distribution, and promotion systems.

As indigenous African writers took up the pen, it quickly became apparent that the necessary infrastructure for typesetting, printing, publishing, and distributing books to global readers was largely unavailable within Africa. Consequently, writers on the continent sought external avenues. The now celebrated figures of African literature gained popularity and exposure through non-African channels, choosing traditional publishing contracts with Western-based² publishing houses to become household names. These publishers, many established in the 1800s and early 1900s, eagerly sought fresh and novel content from a world largely unfamiliar to their Western readers.

FAMOUS AFRICAN AUTHORS & THE PUBLISHERS BEHIND THEM



Argumentatively, Africa's greatest pioneering novelist to achieve global popularity was Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian author of "Things Fall Apart." In 1957, Achebe possessed a single handwritten copy of his now-famous book. Faced with the absence of typing services in Nigeria, he dispatched his handwritten work along with £22 to a typing service in London, requesting them to transcribe the manuscript. However, after receiving no response, he entrusted a colleague travelling to London to follow up on the manuscript and secure the typed version. Once typed, Achebe submitted the manuscript to a literary agent he was recommended to in London. Despite facing multiple rejections, the manuscript eventually found its way into the hands of executives at Heinemann Publishing, who agreed to publish the work. On 17 June 1958, the first 2,000 hardcover copies were printed. The book received a positive reception from the British press, sparking a burgeoning interest in African literature.^{1 2}

Subsequently, Heinemann Publishing established what came to be known as the African Writers Series, which became the foremost publisher of African literature, traditionally releasing over 300 titles by African authors. As their inaugural African writer, Chinua Achebe played a pivotal role in paving the way for other authors to follow suit, establishing a direct connection between African authors and Heinemann for publishing and distribution. With their enduring presence in the publishing industry, Heinemann effectively introduced African literature to the global market for nearly four decades. Consequently, they propelled many African writers into the limelight, elevating their status above others. Some notable authors who benefited from Heinemann's support and published extensively under their imprint include:

- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenyan) – 11 books published by Heinemann ⁴
- Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria) – 10 books published by Heinemann ⁵
- Chinua Achebe (Nigerian) – 9 books published by Heinemann ⁶
- Bessie Head (S. Africa) – 8 Books published by Heinemann ⁷
- Cyprian Ekwensi (Nigerian) – 7 books published by Heinemann ⁸
- John Munonye (Nigerian) – All 6 books published by Heinemann ⁹

- Aluko, T.M – 6 books published by Heinemann ¹⁰
- Mongo Beti (Cameron) – 5 books published by Heinemann ¹¹
- Ousmane Sembene (Senegal) – 5 Books published by Heinemann ¹²
- Nuruddin Farah (Somali) – 4 books published by Heinemann ¹³
- Syl Cheney-Coker (Sierra Leone) – 4 books published by Heinemann ¹⁴
- Steve Chimombo (Malawi) – 4 books published by Heinemann ¹⁵
- Alex La Guma (S. Africa) – 4 Books published by Heinemann ¹⁶
- Taban Lo Liyong (S.Sudan) – 4 Books published by Heinemann ¹⁷
- Nelson Mandela's – 'No Easy Walk to Freedom' published by Heinemann ¹⁸
- Jomo Kenyatta's – 'Facing Mount Kenya' published by Heinemann ¹⁹
- Kwame Nkrumah's – 'Neo-Colonialism' published by Heinemann ²⁰

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2. LitLovers. Things Fall Apart (Achebe): <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/1036-things-fall-apart-achebe?start=1>
3. Heinemann African Writers Series: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heinemann_African_Writers_Series
4. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ngūgĩ_wa_Thiong'o
5. Buchi Emecheta: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buchi_Emecheta
6. Chinua Achebe: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua_Achebe
7. Bessie Head: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessie_Head
8. Cyprian Ekwensi: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprian_Ekwensi
9. John Munonye: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Munonye
10. T.M. Aluko: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._M._Aluko
11. Mongo Beti: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongo_Beti
12. Ousmane Sembene: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ousmane_Sembene
13. Nuruddin Farah: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuruddin_Farah
14. Syl Cheney-Coker: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syl_Cheney-Coker
15. Steve Chimombo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Chimombo
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21. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimamanda_Ngozi_Adichie
22. Ben Okri: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Okri
23. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jennifer_Nansubuga_Makumbi
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As members of the esteemed Heinemann fraternity, many of these authors garnered nominations and received prestigious literary awards and acclaim worldwide. This recognition expanded the reach of their books and propelled them to become household names.

In addition, notable African authors, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigerian) ²¹, Ben Okri (Nigerian/British) ²² and Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi (Uganda/British) ²³, were granted the opportunity to have their works traditionally published by Western publishers. This propelled them onto the global stage at the onset of their literary careers, providing them with exposure to international audiences and granting them access to literary awards and recognition not typically prevalent among self-published African writers.

In his essay titled "African Publishing Minefields and Woes of the African Writer," esteemed Kenyan author Stanley Gazemba highlights a significant void resulting from the decline of Heinemann's African Writers Series (AWS) in the mid-1980s. Gazemba suggests that this decline may have contributed to the overall regression of Africa's presence in the global book market. According to him, AWS's success was attributed, in part, to Heinemann's extensive physical network in major capitals across the Commonwealth, facilitating seamless movement of its writers across international borders, supported by substantial financial resources. ²⁴

TRADITIONAL VS. SELF-PUBLISHING

It is evident that the vast majority, if not all, of the African literature known and recognised globally as "Bestselling African Books" or "Bestselling African Authors" have been published through traditional means, predominantly utilising Western-based publishing houses in the UK or the USA for publicity, promotion, and distribution. Notably, Chinua Achebe remains the sole African author to appear on the list of bestselling books of all time, with his acclaimed novel "Things Fall Apart" selling a remarkable 20 million copies.

In contrast, self-publishing authors face a distinct reality, with only a handful managing to attain widespread distribution and sales on par with the achievements of traditionally published works. While notable self-publishing successes like Robert Kiyosaki's "Rich Dad, Poor Dad," Andy Weir's "The Martian," and E.L. James'

"Fifty Shades of Grey"²⁸ exist, such instances remain relatively uncommon. Importantly, this level of self-publishing success is yet to be witnessed among African authors, regardless of whether their works fall within secular or Christian genres.

Among Christian-based self-published books, only one work stands out for achieving large scale distribution and selling over 20 million copies: "The Shack" by Canadian author William Young.²⁹ Originally self-published in 2008 with just 15 copies, it went on to achieve remarkable success.

When analysing the implications of these statistics, it is essential to consider the distribution and sales perspective. According to Tiffany Hawk, a book publishing coach and agent, traditional publishing offers authors access to extensive distribution channels, including brick-and-mortar bookstores, airports, book displays, online platforms and libraries. On the other hand, self-published authors primarily rely on online platforms such as eBook platforms, small consignments with local bookshops, print-on-demand paperbacks, or their own personal websites and social media pages for distribution.

In terms of average costs and royalties, traditional publishing options outweigh those of self-publishing and are often more suitable for African authors who may lack the necessary resources for self-publication. Traditionally published authors typically receive first-time advances ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000 and can expect to earn approximately \$3,360 per year in annual earnings. Conversely, self-publishing authors should anticipate upfront costs of roughly \$2,000 to \$4,000 and an average return of \$1,000 to \$1,951 if they actively market and distribute their books after publication.³² A survey by The Guardian reveals even more challenging self-publishing statistics, with 77% of all self-published writers earning less than \$1,000 a year.

Based on my observations as a self-publishing publisher within Africa, it is evident that the majority of African authors opt for self-publishing. However, those who achieve sales of 3,000 copies or more possess distinctive characteristics that set them apart:

- **Commitment to Quality and International Book Standards:** These authors invest time and resources into perfecting their cover design, typesetting, editing, and book blurbs. Their books exhibit a level of quality that allows them to compete with traditionally pub-



lished works.

- **Consistent and Captivating Marketing:**

Successful self-published authors in Africa are dedicated to ongoing and consistent online and offline marketing efforts. They organise book launches, network with friends and peers, utilise their books as platforms for speaking engagements, teaching opportunities, and public appearances. Moreover, they invest time in designing and promoting advertisements, signage, videos, blogs, and social media campaigns to effectively promote their books.

- **Large Networks:** Achieving success in the self-publishing arena in Africa often requires authors to not only demonstrate the qualities mentioned above but also possess strong networks and connections that extend beyond their immediate community. These individuals may have ties to the African diaspora, international travel experience, or work in multinational spaces. Furthermore, they establish connections with marketers, reporters, television personalities, or well-known figures who can leverage their influence to further propel the book's reach.

SECULAR VERSUS CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING

Now that we have gained an overview of the broader publishing landscape for African authors and publishers let us delve into Christian Publishing specifically. Christian publishing traces its roots back to the mid-1400s with the advent of the Gutenberg press. In actuality, penetrating the realm of Christian book publishing and attaining bestseller status proves considerably more formidable than in the secular domain. Among the 150 all-time bestselling books, excluding the Bible, only one Christian book secured a spot—Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Life with an impressive 33 million copies sold. Likewise, within the list of 150 bestselling book series, merely two Christian authors are featured: C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia with a remarkable 120 million copies sold, and Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins' The Left Behind Series with a notable 65 million copies sold.⁴⁰ These figures corroborate the notion that Christian books backed by renowned authors associated with robust evangelical doctrine and promoted through strong traditionally Christian publishing houses, as well as those falling within popular Christian fiction genres, tend to thrive in the market.

It is important to acknowledge that most book statistics are rough estimates rather than precise

figures, as book publishing statistics are not readily available in all countries, particularly in Africa.

AFRICAN LITERATURE & STATISTICS

In the mid-1980s, AWS underwent a transition to independent African ownership. This shift was initially celebrated as a source of pride, empowering Africans to control their own affairs and benefit from the financial gains within the continent. Yet, author Stanley Gazemba, in his essay on African publishing, astutely observes that the aftermath of this transition revealed a different reality. The new generation of entrepreneurs focused more on safeguarding their individual interests within limited territories rather than nurturing the crucial cross-turf and cross-border networks that Heinemann had painstakingly established.

A study conducted by UNESCO and the International Publishers Association in Nigeria indicates that the African literature industry is enjoying steady growth, with a diverse range of writers and publishers creating content across various genres, both fiction and non-fiction. Interestingly, fiction remains the most widely read genre, even within Africa. According to a 2015 UNESCO report on Book Publishing, South Africa emerges as the leading publisher on the continent, followed by Egypt, Nigeria, and Kenya. Collectively, these four countries contribute over 50% of all published books, demonstrating consistent annual growth of 6.5%. Despite this progress, the African book market represents a mere 1% of the global publishing revenue, underscoring its relatively modest position within the global book industry.

While global statistics clearly show that fiction is the preferred genre among Christian writers worldwide, it is important to recognize that the majority of African Christian writers gravitate towards non-fiction genres. These genres encompass various topics, including Christian living, self-help, motivational/inspirational literature, pastoral teachings, biographies-memoirs, and African Christian history. As a result, this divergence from global reader preferences significantly impacts the sales and distribution of African Christian authors' works. Often, their reach is confined to personal networks of friends and family, who support their books based on their personal relationships with the authors.

BOOK COSTS & DISTRIBUTION

As per an article in Quartz Africa, the average cost of a book in Africa stands at approximately \$15, which surpasses the global average of \$10.43. This disparity can be attributed to inflated paper and production costs within the continent, as well as a significant reliance on book imports from Western countries. BBC reports that in specific cases, such as Uganda, book prices can reach the equivalent of an individual's monthly salary, leading many people to seek alternative means of accessing reading material.⁴⁴ This issue is not exclusive to Uganda but prevalent across the African continent, resulting in copyright infringement, illegal distribution channels, and financial losses for authors and publishers. Nonetheless, dedicated efforts are underway to address these challenges and promote the legitimate distribution and popularity of African books both regionally and globally.

AFRICAN INITIATIVES IMPROVING PUBLISHING & DISTRIBUTION:

- **Literary Festivals, Conferences & Expos:**

Literary events play a crucial role in improving distribution by providing authors and publishers with visibility. Prominent annual events include the Gaborone Book Festival (Botswana), the Open Book Festival (Cape Town, South Africa), the Kaduna Book & Arts Festival (Nigeria), the Lagos Book & Art Festival (Nigeria), Litfest Harare (Zimbabwe), Mawondo Literary Festival (Kenya), Pa Gya! Literary Festival (Ghana), Mogadishu Book Fair (Somalia), Time of the Writer Festival (South Africa), Cairo International Book Fair (Egypt), and the Nigeria International Book Fair (Lagos), among others.⁴⁵

- **Book Awards & Author Recognition Programs:**

As the popularity of writing continues to grow, efforts are underway across the continent to enhance the overall quality of literature produced in Africa. With a majority of authors choosing self-publishing, there has been a noticeable deficiency in the overall standard of work, resulting in reduced international appeal, lower sales, and diminished interest in locally produced books, as African readers often turn to Western alternatives. To address this, the emergence of book awards and recognition programs aims to honour those whose work meets current international standards. Notable examples include The Annual Vine Awards (a Christian Book Impact Award in Uganda), The ACABA Awards (African Christian Authors Book Awards in Kenya), The Nigeria Prize for Literature (a non-Christian financial award), AKO Caine Prize for African Writing (a financial award),

the Nommo Awards (for fiction writers), The South Africa Literary Awards (SALA), and The Safal-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature (a financial prize), among others.

- **Publishing Degrees & Scholarship Funds:**

Efforts are being made to address the prevalent issue of subpar quality and standards in the majority of books published on the continent. Numerous individuals and organisations are actively engaged in educating publishers and other stakeholders involved in the book production and supply chain, with the aim of raising the overall standards to a higher level. Notably, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology in Ghana offers a pioneering program in Publishing Studies, the first of its kind in West Africa.⁴⁷ Additionally, other institutions such as the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg⁴⁸ and the University of Pretoria in South Africa⁴⁹ also provide relevant programs in this field. In line with promoting quality writing, the Miles Morland Foundation Writing Scholarship operates as a grant fund rather than an educational program. This prestigious scholarship is awarded to exceptional writers with compelling book ideas that have the potential to be developed into full-length non-fiction or fictional novels.⁵⁰ Through such initiatives, there is a concerted effort to uplift the standards of African literature and empower talented writers to produce impactful and engaging works.

- **Digital Sales & Print Distribution:**

Over the past few years, African writers and publishers have increasingly embraced digital sales platforms to enhance the visibility of their products among potential buyers. These platforms typically function as digital marketplaces where customers can place orders online, with physical products subsequently shipped to their locations. While these platforms have succeeded in promoting local authors and their books, they still encounter obstacles in terms of achieving widespread global distribution. Some notable platforms facilitating this digital and print distribution include African Books Collective (for Publisher-exclusive distribution), Jumia (Several African locations), Mahiri Books (Uganda), Christian Literature Communications (Kenya), and others.

- **eBook & Audiobook Distribution:**

One of the latest trends in book distribution in Africa is the rise of eBook platforms and eReaders. In Uganda, AfricanBooks.com has been at the forefront of this development, providing a platform for digital book distribution. Similarly, in Nigeria, eBook platforms have gained popularity. However, due to challenges related to payment processing both within and outside of Nigeria, these platforms primarily cater to authors and readers within the country.



CHALLENGES TO WIDESPREAD DISTRIBUTION WITHIN AFRICA:

When it comes to the distribution of African literature on a global scale, several key challenges have impeded its widespread growth. These challenges include:

- **Plagiarism** – With many authors self-publishing their works, there is a lack of oversight and monitoring, resulting in inadequate permissions and improper citation of content. This raises concerns for international distributors who are wary of potential legal repercussions associated with publishing African content.

- **Piracy & Copyright Infringement** – Piracy and copyright infringement are significant challenges within the African publishing industry. These issues manifest in various contexts, including educational institutions such as schools and universities, as well as online platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp. These unauthorised practices result in the theft of content and the distribution of copyrighted material without proper permissions. As a consequence, authors and publishers are deprived of their rightful earnings

- **Lack of Inter-continental Collaboration & Networks** – The absence of collaboration and networking among the 54 countries in Africa hinders the improvement of overall book distribution and awareness. Efforts are being made to address this issue, with platforms like AfricanBooks.com working towards establishing intercontinental collaboration in book sales and featuring authors from over ten countries. Similarly, Africa Speaks is actively engaged in connecting publishers across state boundaries. However, there remains a need for greater cooperation in creating a unified list of content, such as an African wide ISBN Database, a Continent-wide copyright protection authority, as well as developing comprehensive distribution channels and networks that span the entire continent

- **Limited access to Global Distribution Networks:** As previously discussed in our analysis of traditional publishing versus self-publishing and the associated distribution networks, many African publishers rely on external networks to promote their works. Organisations like African Books Collective offer a collection of 3,000 books by African-based publishers, but this represents only a fraction of the vast number of books produced in Africa. Furthermore, these entities primarily collaborate with traditional publishers and often require the relinquishment of distribution

rights for most Western nations, thereby further constraining the ability of African publishers to distribute their works effectively. Moreover, prominent Christian distribution networks and publishing houses in the Western world, such as Zondervan, Thomas Nelson, Tyndale House, Intervarsity Press, David C. Cook, and Faithwords Publishing, generally do not accept unsolicited submissions. This poses a challenge for African authors seeking participation in these networks, limiting their opportunities for wider distribution and recognition. Addressing these limitations in accessing global distribution networks is crucial for African publishers and authors to expand their reach and gain exposure on a global scale.

- **Insufficient Funding for Large-scale Publishing and Distribution Infrastructure:**

Western-based publishers have invested considerable time and resources into developing comprehensive distribution networks encompassing physical bookstores, online retailers, libraries, and book clubs, ensuring maximum visibility and accessibility of their publications. These networks include extensive shipping systems, well-curated book catalogues, easily accessible book review platforms, national book records, and more. In contrast, the African continent is still in the early stages of exploring and implementing such infrastructure in 2023. As a positive step forward, in June 2023, the Uganda National Library took the significant initiative of making its ISBN catalogue available online for searches and reference purposes, marking a milestone in digital accessibility. Additionally, other African libraries, such as the National Libraries of South Africa and Kenya, have embraced digitisation to enhance their services. However, the lack of sufficient funding remains a major obstacle to establishing robust publishing and distribution infrastructure across the continent. African publishers and authors face challenges in accessing the necessary financial resources to develop and maintain sophisticated networks similar to those established by their Western counterparts. Adequate funding is

crucial for Africa to build comprehensive systems that facilitate widespread distribution, ensure broad access to literature, and support the growth and visibility of African literature on a global scale.

CHRISTIAN AUTHORS EXTENDING THEIR INFLUENCE BEYOND AFRICA

The representation of African Christian authors who have successfully extended their literary influence beyond the continent's borders remains limited. Conducting an online search yields scarce results in identifying such accomplished authors. Nonetheless, it is notable that pastors, particularly those with international networks, appear to have higher prospects for success in this regard. A compelling example is Ps. Muriithi Wanjau, founder of the Mavuno Church Movement (Headquartered in Kenya). His debut book titled *Mizizi* has achieved global recognition with widespread sales. The book's impact was significant enough to warrant an adaptation into a USA-Version titled *Rooted*.⁵¹

While Ps. Muriithi Wanjau serves as a prominent example, there is a need for further exploration to identify additional Christian authors from Africa who have made a significant mark on the global literary stage. Uncovering more such success stories will shed light on the potential and talent of African Christian authors in expanding Africa's literary contributions to a wider international audience.

CONCLUSION

The global publishing landscape shows a significant disparity between secular and Christian content, with secular works outnumbering Christian works by a ratio of ten to one. This discrepancy can be attributed to the alignment of secular content with popular reading trends and genres that garner higher sales. In contrast, Christian content predominantly focuses on non-fiction genres that have limited appeal to a broader readership. To thrive in the book distribution industry, Christian authors must adapt their writing and messages to genres that resonate with a wider audience.

Moreover, the challenges of discoverability and distribution of African content extend beyond the African Christian writing community and affect the entire African writing community. The authors who have achieved global success did not solely rely on their religious affiliation but benefited from the support of traditional international publishers dedicated to showcasing, promoting, marketing, and distributing African-based stories. Globally, around nine out of ten renowned authors owe their fame to traditional

publishing models backed by the collective efforts of the industry.

For African Christian authors and publishers dedicated to promoting African Christian content on a global scale, it is evident that the establishment of robust systems, structures, and networks is imperative. These endeavours will not only create opportunities and foster partnerships but also enable access to larger international distribution channels, addressing the existing gap in African publishing while avoiding the mistakes of the past. Elevating the standards and quality of writing among indigenous Christian authors is essential to gain a competitive edge in the global market. Collaboration and unity across the continent play a vital role, as statistics indicate that individual ventures rarely yield significant breakthroughs in the highly competitive book industry. By working together, African Christian authors and publishers can enhance their impact and reach a broader audience with their valuable content.

