



**AFRICA
*SPEAKS**

**THE SECOND
ROUNDTABLE
CONSULTATION
2024**

5th -9th March
Nairobi, Kenya

A circular graphic containing a stylized map of Africa. The map is divided into regions, each with a different color and a unique pattern: 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.

www.africaspeaks.global/asroco



**CONFERENCE
PAPERS**

DISTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS BEYOND BORDERS IN AFRICA

(Translated from the paper originally written in French)

Written and Presented by: Vincent-de-Paul LELE

Publisher in Chief at EDITIONS CLE YAOUNDE

Presented to: 2nd Africa Speaks Roundtable Consultation (for ASROCO2024) on 23rd August 2023



1.

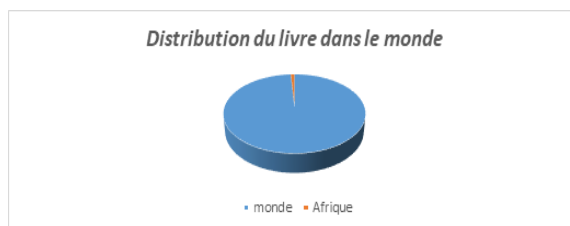
Summary:

The aim of this brief reflection is to understand how the distribution of books, particularly Christian books, works across borders in Africa. By tracing the history of the book in general and analysing the socio-economic conditions of book life in Africa, in comparison with conditions in the West, new avenues, notably the exploitation of technological means and training, are mapped out to boost the circulation of Christian books on the African continent.

Keywords: Distribution, book, bookshops, eBook, book circuit

INTRODUCTION

Books circulate well all over the world, except in Africa. The question of book distribution is likely the most haunting of the problems of the book circuit in this part of the world. Indeed, when you visit several African capitals, you can count the number of bookshops and libraries on your fingertips, as opposed, for example, to the beverage outlets that abound on every street corner in the same cities. In 2022, it was estimated that the book market would reach 4.3 billion euros, of which only 1% would be distributed in Africa. This is an insignificant share of the global flow of books.



Book distribution in the world

For any company to set up efficiently, it's essential to ask questions about the purpose and flow of production. What's the point of producing books if they won't reach the end reader? The question of distribution is a crucial concern for the life of the book in Africa, all the more so as writing and publishing seem to be in a better position. However, many African authors, unable to find a better home for their works on the continent, prefer to be published in the West.

Compared with the West: Europe, America and even Asia, Africa is lagging far behind in terms of distribution capacity. After all, distribution basically means bringing the product to the end consumer, which presupposes efficient transport infrastructure, and postal services. Generally speaking, books are not visible in Africa. And if this is the case for non-Christian books, which naturally have a larger audience, it's understandable that the fate of Christian books is far more serious.

The aim of this little reflection is to understand the problems undermining book distribution in

Africa in general, and to outline possible solutions, especially for Christian books.

By drawing comparisons between what is done in the West and what we see in Africa today, and by pointing out the difficulties of the strategies currently deployed in Africa, we will come up with some concrete proposals for improving book distribution in Africa.

Hence the following outline:

1. Global explanations for the gap
2. Traditional book distribution
3. Electronic distribution methods
4. Book distribution initiatives in Africa
5. Proposals for a better circulation of Christian books in Africa.

GLOBAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE GAP

The West boasts a rich history and tradition of reading, in stark contrast to Africa, which has long been characterized by an oral culture. Evidence indicates that writing and reading flourished in Europe as early as the 4th millennium BC, dating back 3000 years before Christ. In contrast, Africa, predominantly an oral continent, flirted with writing mainly through contact with settlers in the 19th century. This is with the exception of Egypt, which pioneered the use of papyrus 4,000 years ago, influencing ancient Greece.

It should also be pointed out that books written in widely spoken languages are distributed easier. As far as writing is concerned, many African countries have written languages: Amharic in Ethiopia, Swahili in East Africa, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi in Rwanda and Burundi... But these languages have only recently been written and are not widely used, so they don't have the scope to feed a book large market, unlike books written in languages from the West like English and French, which are widely spoken internationally, thus providing a large international market. It's one thing to have a script and another to have people capable of reading it.

In Europe, the book industry dates back to the invention of printing in the 15th century, whereas in most African countries there is no record of real historical infrastructure to support local book production and distribution until later centuries. Obviously, the level of progress of this industry varies not only according to colonial his-

tory, but also to the national initiatives taken by each country. For example, the state of the publishing industries in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, two neighbouring countries, is not the same.

The existence of infrastructure and communication routes, especially better roads in the West, favours the circulation of books, whereas in Africa it's not easy to reach the capitals of two neighbouring countries by road. Take Yaoundé and Libreville, for example; the road in between is badly degraded, and travellers often feel like they have to bribe their way through the heavy police control stationed along the road to avoid further inconveniences.

The literacy rate is also an important factor. Today, Africa is still trying to close the literacy gap, whereas since the 19th century, vast literacy campaigns have raised the rate to over 90% in the West. Though some African countries like Seychelles, Equatorial Guinea and Namibia have high literacy rates similar to those in Western countries, most others, like Chad and Mali have literacy rates as low as 40%.

In the West, policies and regulations are incentive-based and inclusive, whereas in Africa, borders are often difficult to cross. Customs barriers are a real hindrance in shipping books across borders.

The level of development of the country is a key factor, because the standard of living of the population influences the situation of the book circuit. Is it feasible, for example, to emphasise policies in favour of book production and distribution in a country where the population lacks vital needs such as food and water?

Without going into too much detail, let's take a look at how the traditional book sales circuit works.

TRADITIONAL BOOK DISTRIBUTION

What does distribution entail? It involves listing, stocking, shipping, returning, invoicing, and selling. When a publisher has finished producing a book, all the stock is entrusted to a distributor, who carries out all the necessary operations to ensure that the book is sold everywhere. The distributor will pay the publisher the amount of sales calculated according to the percentage agreed in the contract. For example, the book may be assigned to a distributor at 50% or 55%.

The book distribution circuit includes:



- Bookstores in the broadest sense, including book clubs, newsagents and newsstands;
- Cultural superstores;
- Food superstores.

In France, distribution is well developed. There are around a hundred distributors. All the major publishing houses have developed their own distribution subsidiaries: Le Seuil has Volumen, Gallimard Sodis, Hachette Livre International Hachette, Flammarion Union, and so on.

Bookshops and reading points are spread throughout the country. There are between 20,000 and 25,000 book sales outlets in France.

In other Western countries, the status quo is much the same, and infrastructures are just as well developed. In the United States and the United Kingdom, after the all-too-quickly proclaimed death of the book in the face of internet competition and the post-COVID era, we are seeing a renewed enthusiasm for reading, particularly among young people. The number of independent bookshops is increasing year on year.

On the other hand, bookshops and libraries are rare in Africa. In a city like Yaoundé, capital of a country with over 25,000,000 inhabitants, there are no real bookshops worthy of the name. There are about three (Librairie Saint-Paul, Peuples Noirs, Clé-Equinoxe) places that don't pay much for books. This is the case in many other French-speaking countries, where there is only one real bookshop in the capital, often owned by expatriates. Such is also the case of the Librairie de France in Abidjan. In English-speaking countries, the situation is certainly less dramatic. South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya for example, are doing better in terms of distribution. It's easy to see why, as Lena Mirembe pointed out in her presentation on Discoverability of African Christian books, these countries account for around 50% of the continent's production.

DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS

In addition to traditional channels, information and communication technologies have given a tremendous boost to the dissemination and distribution of books. On the internet, websites and various platforms have been developed to promote and sell physical books. While the eBook is also being developed to facilitate access to digital versions of books. Between the two forms,

there's an intermediate option provided by Print on Demand. We sell before we print.

As far as the eBook is concerned, if the technological infrastructure (low-cost high-speed internet, reliable and secure electrical system, accessible reading terminals) can cover a market of at least 16% of the world's book buyers, it will be possible to sell it. This is not the case in Africa, where such facilities are lacking.

An initiative such as Paperright, launched by Arthur Atwell, aims to further simplify the distribution of eBooks through a system of photocopying in remote African towns, while protecting the rights of authors and publishers.

"We negotiate printing rights with rights holders and offer a payment tool that enables any photocopy store, NGO, school or library with a printer or similar device to distribute legal copies of books(5)."

Apart from providing platforms to sell eBooks, the internet is also a means of promoting and distributing hard copies. Physical books can be distributed in a variety of ways.

1. With Storage

Either the publisher himself promotes the book online via his website and various social media channels, and takes care of invoicing and sales as in the traditional channel,

or the publisher sub-contracts a large online distributor / bookseller such as Amazon.

NB: Shipping costs can be high if the customer is too far from the storage location.

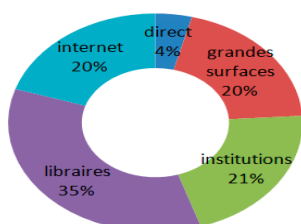
Much as digital innovations have disrupted traditional book distribution models, their use is yet to be reinforced in Africa because buyers (and online sellers) in Africa often have difficulties accessing secure online payment systems.

2. POD

Print on demand (POD) means that the book is sold (online) before being printed. The advantages are: no inventory management burden, no returns. But POD units need to be located not too far from the target customers, otherwise shipping costs will always weigh heavily on the book's circulation.



réseaux de distribution du livre



After outlining the existing distribution possibilities, both traditional and electronic, let's take a look at some of the initiatives taken in Africa to bring books to life within and beyond its borders.

BOOK DISTRIBUTION INITIATIVES IN AFRICA

There have been a number of initiatives on the continent aimed at resolving the problems of dissemination and distribution. We're going to take a look at some of them here, while pointing out their limitations.

Book Caravans

An initiative of the Association Internationale des Libraires Francophones, the caravan has been criss-crossing Africa since 2004, visiting schools, high schools and colleges in various towns across a country, with cultural events organized around them. Based on the peddler model, the idea is to take books to their final destination at reduced prices. Each country can organize its own caravan, and even each publisher or distributor. The impact is real: in 2007, in West Africa, 10 countries crossed, 43 towns, 60,000 people reached, 38,532 books bought, worth 165,088 euros.

However, these initiatives have their limits: mobilizing authors, organizing literary and poetry competitions, and travel costs are not always covered. Hence the support of French organizations such as the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), the Centre National de la Lecture (CNL), MAEE... which sell mainly books by French publishers, even if most of the authors are African.



Book Fairs and Exhibitions in Africa

For example:

- Salon International du Livre Africain (SILA) - Abidjan
- Dakar International Book Festival (FILDAK) - Dakar
- Ouagadougou International Book Festival (FILO) - Ouagadougou
- Lagos Book and Art Festival (LABAF)
- South African (Cape Town) Book Fair

Granted, most of these fairs have their problems: firstly, financing the event (irregular in Cameroon), and secondly, their often national approach. But these are initiatives to be encouraged!

African Literary Prizes

Numerous prizes have been set up in Africa to encourage book promotion and distribution, such as:

The Noma Prize for Publication in Africa, funded by the Japanese Shoichi Noma Foundation (part of the Kodansha publishing group). The First Edition, winner was Mariama Bâ, *Une si Longue Lettre*, published by Nouvelles Éditions Africaines (NEA, Senegal). The book was subsequently translated into 14 languages worldwide.

The Grand Prix Littéraire d'Afrique Noire, launched by ADELFF - Association Des Écrivains de Langue Française – to promote writers from around the world who express themselves in French. The winners are always Africans, although they are increasingly published in France.

The Prix Littéraire les Afriques created in 2015, by the readers' association La CÈNE Littéraire. the Prix littéraire Les AFRIQUES is awarded once



a year to an African or Afrodescendant writer of fiction.

The Caine Prize Awards, an annual literary prize for the best African writer of English-language short stories.

In short, while the awards help to promote authors, books still circulate more in the West than in Africa. In Cameroon, few people know of Imbolo Mbue, winner of the Prix Les Afriques 2022, who sells hundreds of thousands of copies in the USA. What's more, the awarding of these prizes benefits the publishers who published them. Encouraging the free transfer of reproduction rights to African publishers for the African market can help book distribution in Africa.

PROMOTIONAL STRUCTURES

Numerous promotional structures, often subsidized by international organizations, exist and have met with mixed fortunes. Here are a few examples.

The "Terres Solidaires" initiative of the International Alliance of Independent Publishers was launched in 2007 to promote the circulation of books in the French-speaking world. Essentially based in Africa, the publishing houses taking part in this collection rely above all on co-publishing to make texts by African authors already published in France, and now by authors first discovered by African publishing houses, accessible to African readers (at an average price of 3500 Fcfa). This is the case for *Munyal, les Larmes de la Patience*, by Djaili Amadou Amal, the 13th title in the collection, originally published in 2017 by Proximité Editions based in Yaoundé, Cameroon. The book's revival by Emmanuelle Collas in France brought it international recognition. While it's undeniable that African authors benefit from this spotlight, does it really benefit publishers and the circulation of books in Africa?

Afrilivres is an association of French-speaking publishers whose aim is to facilitate the circulation of books in Africa by means of a cyber-catalogue showcase at www.afrilivres.net. The aim is "to de-compartmentalize African publishing, to structure orders, to ensure that the production of African publishing houses is known to Africans, to work in synergy with the entire book chain and to federate promotional actions". The project supported by the French Institute was intended

to function as a distribution centre. But most new strategies to date have failed to bear fruit.

A group of seventeen publishers, all active in sub-Saharan Africa, met in London in 1985 and set up African Books Collective in 1989 in the UK, to then market and distribute their titles in Northern markets, mainly in Europe and the USA, and more widely in all non-African countries. Today there are more than 50 of them, with 1,700 titles in stock. It's a question of attacking the markets that are profitable.

The Centre Régional d'Édition et de Publication du Livre en Afrique (CREPLA), based in Cameroon but created by several African countries, initially supported by Unesco, is a project has since been abandoned by other countries.

Digital Promotion Platforms

Young start-ups have also sprung up with the ambition of distributing books on the internet and having the purchased books shipped by conventional means. These include <http://www.bookconekt.com/> in Benin and Hidiculture.com in Togo, which specialize in children's books. Indeed, to tackle the issue of illiteracy and the lack of a reading culture as obstacles to book development in Africa, we need to prepare the nursery of readers from an early age. Teach parents to give books as birthday presents, rather than toys of any kind.

Rafu Books in Kenya has the same ambition, and already covers Uganda and Tanzania.

NENA in Senegal does the same for ebooks: www.librairienumeriqueafricaine.com

Africanbooks.com, founded in Uganda by Lena Mirembe, is a platform to sell eBooks from all African countries.

Unfortunately, despite all these innovations, distribution of both print and eBooks within and beyond African countries remains an unresolved problem.

PROPOSALS FOR BETTER CIRCULATION OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS IN AFRICA

Our proposals touch on several aspects of publishing.

1. **Training:** In Christian circles, the problem of training in the book trade is even more acute. The profession of publisher, bookseller and writer must be learned. We can't simply talk about the divine call to mission and ignore the training factor. All the reminders in the previous sections follow this logic. By mastering what happens in the distribution of secular books, we can appropriate or draw inspiration from secular book distribution strategies. Langham's initiatives on literature and support for training and Media Associated International's (MAI) LittAfrica are to be commended.
2. **Distribution in theology schools.** A census of the schools and training institutes scattered across the continent provides a potential customer base for theological reflection documents.
3. **Temples and places of worship** are regular exhibition venues for Christian books.
4. **Book fairs specifically** set up for Christian books.
5. **Develop the POD technology for regions where we can easily make shipments by road.** Shipping books from Cameroon to Benin for instance, i.e. from Central Africa to West Africa, is extremely expensive by air, in addition to customs clearance fees and other hassles. It is possible to get in touch with a good printer based in Cotonou or an easily accessible capital to print and deliver directly. Having high quality digital production units or POD in the sub-regions can satisfy even small quantities of demand in the region. From Yaoundé, books can easily be shipped by road to Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea and elsewhere.
6. **Websites specialized in Christian books for distribution.** Encourage African publishers and distributors to set them up.
7. **Develop digital versions of books.**
8. **Self-distribution and authorship must be at the heart of today's distribution:** immediate relations and entourages, and book promotion on social platforms. Distribution strategies revolving around authors, mobilizing a significant customer base. Canadian author William Young's *The Shack* (8) is a good example of how the author can mobilize distribution of his book, which has sold 20 million copies. Cameroonian born author Leonora Miano has used her personal Face-

book and Instagram accounts to promote her books.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to examine the current situation of book distribution, particularly of Christian books, in Africa; to understand how it works and to identify its difficulties. The review, which may seem to go back too far, has the merit of giving a deep and wide knowledge of book distribution. In the end, this led to a set of proposals which, if properly implemented, could boost the distribution of Christian books on the African continent, and ipso facto contribute to the work of evangelization.

