

# **THE LINK BETWEEN PUBLISHING AND AFRICAN CULTURE**

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- Wikipedia describes publishing as the process of production and [dissemination](#) of [literature](#) or [information](#)—the activity of making information available to the general public. Traditionally, the term refers to the distribution of printed works such as books (the "book trade") and [newspapers](#). With the advent of digital information systems and the [Internet](#), the scope of publishing has expanded to include electronic resources, such as the electronic versions of books and periodicals, as well as [micropublishing](#), [websites](#), [blogs](#), [video games](#) and the like.
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- Publishing includes the stages of the development, acquisition, copyediting, graphic design, production – [printing](#) (and its [electronic equivalents](#)), and [marketing](#) and [distribution](#) of newspapers, magazines, books, [literary works](#), [musical works](#), [software](#) and other works dealing with information, including the [electronic media](#).

- Culture can be defined as the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. It can also be defined as the patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population.
- African culture has been described as largely oral. Although not entirely homogenous, African cultures are fairly similar in terms of beliefs and systems. The cultural beliefs and customs of many African communities were passed down to the next generation through proverbs, fables, riddles, songs, poetry and song. Story telling sessions were common around the fire and under trees as grandparents and parents narrated to their children.
- With a culture that is viewed as oral, what is the link between publishing and African culture? I have put together a few thoughts on this.

- Publishers publish their materials for target audiences. These can be in the form of textbooks, journals, fiction works and magazines among others. For the publications to be meaningful to the intended audience, the materials must be written in a language that the reader can read and understand.
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- I will use Kenya as an example to amplify a number of points. The language policy in Kenya is that children are taught in the language of the catchment area for the first three years of school. Educationalists generally agree that learning and associated publication in first languages effectively promotes and maintains literacy. It is expected that the child will achieve learning outcomes faster since the teaching is in a language that the child is familiar with. As the child progresses into higher classes in primary school, other languages – English and Kiswahili are introduced as subjects. English is then used as the medium of instruction.

- Language policies and realities in African countries are complex, often controversial, and influence patterns of publishing and writing. This situation is tied not only to the diverse languages spoken in territories carved under colonialism, but also to national and international power relations as well as economic and educational policies pursued since independence.
- Books published in mother tongue are few. Many publishers do not invest in this area because of the small number of users as well as challenges of distribution. Competent authors and copy-editors in local languages are in short supply. Publishing is, after all, a business venture where investors expect to make profits. On the other hand, schools and parents would rather buy books for other subjects such as mathematics and science which are considered as core subjects.

- At the lower primary level, most children are fairly fluent in mother tongue, especially those in the rural areas. With increased urbanization and rural-urban migration, many children end up using Kiswahili or English as the medium of communication. This effectively kills the use of mother tongue in many areas. With limited interaction with materials written in local languages, children will have difficulties in reading mother tongue. As they move away from home into institutions of higher learning, they become more exposed to other communities and information is available mainly in international languages.
- We complain that the African child has lost his identity as he strives to ape the American or European child. Western culture has greatly influenced the young African child today. Social media – Facebook, Twitter, My Space etc have pre-occupied our children to the extent that they are not keen on reading. Reading in mother tongue is almost dead.

- Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the renowned Kenyan author, decided to stop writing in English and instead use his Gikuyu language. He has a number of books written in Gikuyu. However, the number of Gikuyu speakers that can read the language fluently has continued to decline over the years. His novels, Murogi wa Kagogo (The Wizard of the Crow) and Caitani Mutharabaini (Devil on the Cross) have been translated into English and other international languages. This increased the number of readers of the two books.
- Among some African communities, there are no orthographies. This makes it difficult to publish for them. For a majority of them, the first material published in their language is the Bible. The lack of a defined orthography limits the published materials that these communities can access in their languages.

- Textbook publishing is the largest sector in the publishing industry in Africa. Close to 95% of all books published in Africa are textbooks. This is largely driven by the fact that this is where volumes are in terms of number of users and funding from governments. In a bid to increase access and quality of education, free primary education is a common feature in African countries.
- The lack of a strong reading culture makes publishing in other areas a risky venture. Fiction works are slow movers as very few people buy them. Schools are expected to buy readers so as to inculcate a reading culture in children. However, this doesn't always happen as schools are more keen on increasing the number of textbooks in their stock.



It is instructive to note that the young children – up to about ten years of age – are keen on reading and love reading. This is evident during book fairs where the children spend a lot of time at the reading tents. However, this reading habit is killed by the focus on academics as the child moves up to upper primary school. The obsession to excel in academics and competition among schools locks out reading for pleasure. Reading becomes for passing examinations.

It is commonly said of Africans that if you want to hide something from them, put it in a book. This speaks of the lack of a reading culture. I'm sure we have all seen the different ways we pass time at an airport or train station or any other place where we have to wait. In the western world, about half of the people will be reading some material. In Africa, we will be busy talking or dozing away! We travel for hours in bus or plane and sleep through the journey or simply look through the window. Reading is for a few people who will be reading a newspaper or magazine.

Most of the stories published for children draw their materials from African folklore. The sly hare and the slow tortoise feature in many stories, with variations in the moral of the story. Stories were told as a way of inculcating morals, beliefs and values that would guide the young ones. No story was told for the sake of it. Children learnt valuable lessons from these stories. Authors have today borrowed these stories of old and re-told them but have not lost the original message.

Notwithstanding this picture of a continent that has little to offer in terms of publications, there are some good things that can be said.

1. We need to publish more in areas that are familiar to the reader. We need to understand what the readers want and publish materials that meet their needs.
2. Publishers should engage more with the sages in our communities to bring out the stories that we have to tell. They have a wealth of knowledge and information that they take to their graves. The stories need to be told.
3. We need to publish more autobiographies. There has been a marked increase in the number of autobiographies published in Africa. However, the African's morbid fear of death stops a number of them from putting down their life stories. They fear that if they pen their memoirs, they will die.
4. Academic publishing that focuses on African culture should be published. This will enhance the body of knowledge of African culture.
5. We should encourage publishing in mother tongue so as to preserve the African culture.

