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Bellagio in Accra

Katherine Salahi

Books were big news on Ghana Radio in the run-up to the first Ghana International Book Fair held in Accra between November 6-12, 1996. And so, briefly, was the Bellagio Group, whose presence during the fair was broadcast hourly as one of the line-up of distinguished visitors expected to attend.

The programme was packed with events—seminars organised by APNET on scholarly publishing and Francophone-Anglophone cooperation, the Noma Award prize giving ceremony, Pan-African Writers Association lectures, ABC Council of Management and APNET Board meetings, as well as the Bellagio meetings, not to mention the Book Fair itself. So much activity meant a great deal of networking could go on between publishers, which after all was the main purpose. It was a lively, busy, sometimes frustrating, but never dull week.

The Bellagio meetings began with a briefing by Nigerian and Ghanaian publishers on the state of publishing in their respective countries. Current president of the Nigerian Publishers Association (NPA) Lawal Solarin highlighted the overall shortage of books available to students at all levels, the dominance of multinational over local publishers, and the lack of governmental support for Nigerian publishing. On the brighter side, he reported on APNET’s training programme with NPA, and the activities of other associations, concluding that the figure looks good, especially as Nigeria moves into the market economy. Chukwumeka Ike described the work of one of the supporting associations, the non-governmental, non-profit Nigerian Book Foundation.

The Ghana Book Publishers Association (GBPA) lacks adequate government support, according to the immediate past president Eric Ofei of Afiram Publications. The Ministry of Education competes with local publishers. But the government also supports the Publishers Association. GBPA members are working hard to influence government policy and are upbeat about prospects for improvements, with their sights set on an official national book policy.

The Bellagio Group’s roundtable theme was on the significance of holding and running book fairs. Aig Higo, chairman of Heinemann Nigeria spoke on the usefulness of book fairs to African publishers’ provoking lively though sometimes unfocused discussion on book fairs. Higo’s claim that book fairs are a foreign import was countered by Tade Aina of CODESRIA, who argued that the concept of book fairs—the marketplace—is not unAfrican. David Martin of Zimbabwe Publishing House presented a paper on ‘Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF), past, present and future.’

Martin was a major force behind ZIBF in the early days but resigned when the fair began charging entry fees. He criticized the fair’s ‘Frankfurt of Africa’ label as indicative of a tendency to look toward Europe rather than Africa. The current fair is in his view too donor-driven and too packed with meetings. His views were supported by some, hotly contested by others: APNET Chairman Victor Nwankwo, “What’s wrong with ‘Frankfurt of Africa’? It brings people together.” Rockefeller Foundation representative Damien Pwono, “If donors have distorted ZIBF, document it;” and Walter Bgoya, “no problem with too many meetings, you don’t have to go to them all.”

After a presentation on the Nairobi-based Pan-African Children’s Book Fair by Mary Bugembe, Ian Randle of Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, Jamaica talked about South-South cooperation. He spoke, from a position of envy, as there are no book fairs in the Caribbean. He would like to see regional book fairs in Africa work toward a more international perspective, and Southern publishers make a great impact at Northern book fairs. He urged publishers to be more selective about which fairs they attend, but also advocated patience in assessing their value. His first visit to the Zimbabwe Book Fair, he said, did not achieve tangible short-term benefits, but was important in paving the way for further visits where he did good business.

Since the meeting coincided with the Ghana Book Fair it was only fitting that the final session was a hot-off-the-press evaluation of the fair.
Forty years of Nigerian Art Journals

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Journals devoted to art have appeared sporadically in Nigeria during the past four decades: **Black Orpheus,** grandfather of them all, started publication in 1957. Although originally defined as a 'Journal of African and Afro-American literature,' it soon carried articles on the visual arts. With bold, dramatic covers designed initially by Suzanne Wenger and later by Demas Nwoko, and black and white photographs illustrating the articles on art, **Black Orpheus** had an editorial board whose members are now icons of Black literature - Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, John Pepper Clark, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka. By the early 1980s, **Black Orpheus** was re-defined as a 'Journal of the Arts from Africa.'

**New Culture** appeared in 1978 under the aegis of the artist, Demas Nwoko. It embraced the plastic and performing arts with the addition of a children's section containing stories and a page in colour.

**Kario Africana** in 1989. Myo Okeyi, formerly of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, and leader of the Ona group of artists, started Kario Africana, a journal dealing exclusively with the visual arts, particularly those of Nigeria. Modest in format (the early editions were...