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Tatenda Zimbabwe

Dapo
Adeniyi

THE first whiff that there could be problems came days before the opening of the book fair. It even preceded the usual joining events to the fair: workshops, conferences, the most anticipated being the indaba (Shona language term for 'in gathering').

Trish Mbanga, Executive Director of ZIBF had just negotiated her sports combi car out from the expansive gates of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation that chilly Wednesday morning where the writer had been a guest on AM Zimbabwe, ZBC's live breakfast telecast when she asked,

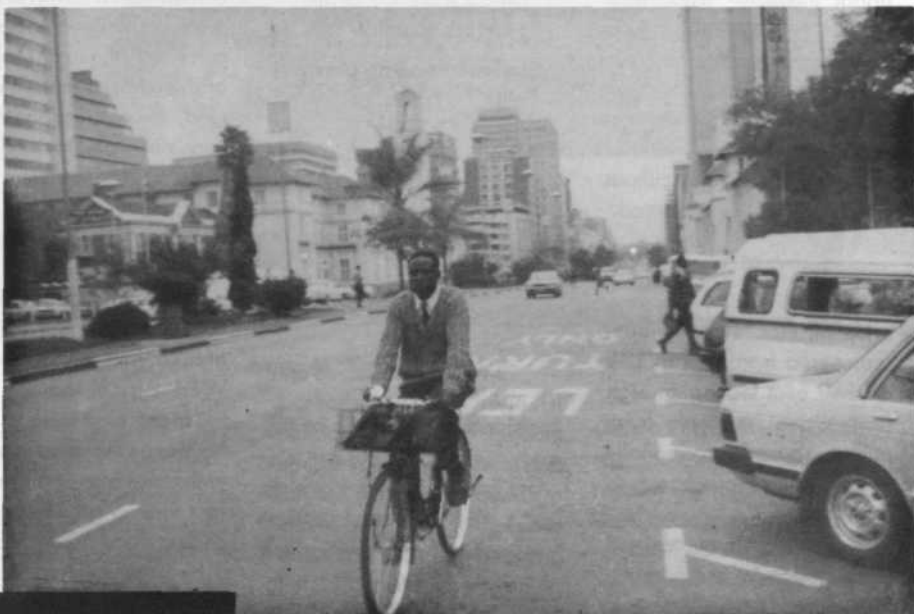
'Have you seen the Herald this morning?'

'No', I replied, but actually should have said, 'couldn't have', since the journey to that edge of Harare's suburbia started so early my eyes had scarcely opened from sleep.

'There's a report that government has barred the galzs from the fair!'

I learnt also that it was a carry-over from the previous year when the first version of government edict forbidding the Book Fair Trust from allocating stands at the fair to the association of Gays and Lesbians was drafted, rousing much dust in its wake.

And true enough, it did not take long, later that morning, as I walked the foyers of the central business district, for my eyes to



Above:
View from ZIBF '96.
Below:
Harare high street.

catch the offending Herald report, layed out on the street's culverts. The screaming headline said and sealed it all: Galzs had been banned from the fair, newspaper pages the days following awash with

threats of open disruptions at the book fair's ceremonies from the galz community on the one hand, and government's promise to meet force with force if it was dared on the other.

The executive director's squint into the misty morning betrayed not a mere hint of worry but a foreboding that I saw, threatened a shadowy cloud over all the effort, the plans and expectations for a most successful outing of the ZIBF in all its six years of evolution.

The bustle of preparations was felt all through the city; we sped past posters advertising the event, strapped to the girth of trees with twines. Talks among townsfolk in shops and pubs also easily veered off to the fair, often revealing each discussant's private plan towards the fair: the common refrain became, 'see you at the fair'. Which began to enlighten the complete visitor about this manner of cultural landscape: traditional lines of demarcation between the elite and regular townsfolk existing elsewhere blurred, especially as it concerned this international event — what only waited to be verified was whether public interest was aroused because of its obvious implications for the national pride or it was the sheer interest in books and culture which the book propagated.

The eventual teeming crowds at the fair seemed to settle all that: even children scampered from stall to stall on their own leafing through promotional manuals from publishers and occasionally making modest purchases.

Part of the bustle occurred at the actual site of the event, in the new stone-walled and thatch-topped structure built into the precincts of the Harare Sculpture Park to join three scores of less permanent fair pavilions, but more appropriately, expansive thatch huts which did not just feature in

the past years but have gone so far as to grant the ZIBF its very ornate, exotic character, at least from the point of view of the non-African spectator. The structure is the new secretariat of the book fair administration. Construction work and wood-panel finishings were only being completed the week previous and movements of man and goods into it were at its height. Trish transformed into her spritely bustling self the moment our exchanges turned to that subject. And for good reason too, for she was proud to reveal to me that she was the very unlicensed architect of Zimbabwe! She had thought up and worked the house into shape with the assistance of local craftsmen and artisans.

'I drove the town planning people mad believe me....'

she started to say.

'They demanded that I produce a copy of the plan but couldn't

believe I had no plan at all!'

By this time, we had arrived in the park and begun to shuffle between the yet empty stalls and pavilions as we made our entry towards the new building.

I would be a proud artist myself, in her shoes, I thought, as we contemplated the secretariat; it seemed quite a natural conclusion for me therefore to have her photographed against a backdrop of the thatched house!

But the local thatch makers found employment in other places around the city — their craft was to be encountered in exclusive cottages and resort centres for tourists. Hotels introduced decors of

thatchwork into bars and restaurants, which I adjudged incongruous in some cases, amidst enormous concrete bulwarks. Some were outright exaggerations designed to satiate the conceptions of European tourists about Africa. Walls displayed assortments of hides from tigers and zebras along with multitudes of hunters' staves and knives. Not untypically, Harare's 'African' eateries kept reserves of 'native' dancers and stunt-makers who emerged in-between meals to render performances which were overtly mendacious — they were more exotic to their African audiences than to guests from elsewhere. Which is not to say that they did not fulfill their functions, for the restaurateurs made brisk sales on food items which at times included wierd if delectable menus of tongues of snakes and crocodiles' flesh!

The pattern of Zimbabwean thatch however shares much similarity with West African thatch: the same roof slope and arch shape, almost rotund, except that the former consisted of thicker and firmer material and so were more permanent and a lot more aesthetically pleasing. Whereas thatchtops, which are still a ubiquitous feature in sahelian Northern Nigeria, and in fact all of sahelian West Africa, have shorter lifespans and in most cases have to be replaced every two years, due also perhaps to the fact that West African rains can be more stormy, capable of beating roofs to shreds from severe drops. And as with traditional modes of building, so with the music and textiles. Xylophone orchestras parading large numbers of instrumentalists graced the fair opening ceremonies and the exhibitions, some comprising of

solely women instrumentalists. The instrument was the same as those known to other parts of the continent except that I thought the Zimbabwean orchestral sound was more exquisite and their singers more sonorous. Much as the same observation of close similarity may be made of the local textile prints, known in Nigeria as 'ankara', they were, in the words of a chance acquaintance, junior cousins of West African prints, boasting of much less splash of colour and flamboyance.

'West Africa is the mother of Africa....' I heard him say.

We have no sculpture, I mean real sculpture, the great African crafts that belong to West Africa. We don't have the paintings either, only music. Culturally West Africa is the mother of Africa.'

Notwithstanding, the book fair from the first day made a good show of the region's rich cultural resources, sifting, selecting, exhibiting the very best with good taste. For in addition to flooding the fair grounds with hordes of musical and dance troupes which included a marvelous children's dance group, it also ensured that the festival's main souvenir, the book fair's folder, was wholly encased with the local coloured textile prints. Even so did associations of printers and graphic artists feature prominently at the pavilions side by side book binders and pre-press companies (all unquestionable allies of the book traders).

The actual book fair, that is, outside the usual conferences, workshops and seminars of writers, publish-

ers and book councils, consisted of two parts, the traders' days and the public days. And the term 'trader' included librarians and representatives of public institutions who arrived to represent the book interests of their organisations with selective eyes. Even so, it was intended primarily to help publishers interact, collaborate and compare notes before the public was allowed to swamp the site. The objective of most publishers, especially the non-Southern Africans, was more to exhibit than to sell, and it was not difficult to see why.

First, Zimbabwe had stringent tax policies on importation that extended to books, which many first-timers found to be strange. It seemed such a contradiction that Africa's most famous book promoter should also be the one to impose duties on books. A manager at the fair's permanent bookshop assured me that the book fair has had to pay duties on imported promotional manuals. And so, it turned out not to be an extraordinary affair for the copies of *Glendora Review* making their first entry into Zimbabwe to be detained by Zimbabwean customs! That is, until the book fair's official intervention. Publishers who knew about the situation from past experience had the good sense to arrive with a few sample copies of their publications 'for exhibition only' and so, were hardly able to honour the usual legitimate demands for gratis copies. Which may have been why the man who to me was ZIBF's most enthusiastic exhibitor in '96, Chief Joop Berkout of Nigeria, slapped the backs of a few friends who visited his stand during the trader's days and said his main task in Harare was to sell foreign



Above: Trish Mbanga Below: Hans M. Zell

rights on his books.

And if it was a job importing books to Zimbabwe, it was a harder job repatriating funds from it, according to a Namibian participant. Such that, even when sales were recorded, the proceeds were more wisely lavished on personal acquisitions from Harare's shops which fortunately were very well stocked. The greatest benefit to African

publishers in my observation was the fact that they were able to interact, particularly on book production. Since the economic decline of the Seventies and Eighties in many African countries and the widespread embrace of structural adjustment programmes which placed premium on local production, foreign importation of goods diminished in quantity (including books authored by African nationals) and ac-

companied by the massive devaluation of the national currencies, where such goods were available they shot astronomically above the purchasing capabilities of the people. African publishers have had to print locally with less sophisticated equipment and less competent manpower, the result being the drastic ebb in the quality of African publishing products. So that the challenge before African publish-

ers in the Nineties has been to achieve high-quality local book production aspiring to international standards with cheaper materials and not-so-sophisticated equipment. A brief tour round the stalls at the fair confirms that African publishers are facing up to the task with different degrees of success. An international fair helps publishers to spy on whole collections by counterparts from other nations and hopefully to compare notes on operational strategies. Some West and East African publishers may be overheard exclaiming about the high production standards of some titles given the same or even confronted by worse, economic and infrastructural problems. For Southern African states, the trend now is to go South, to the big neighbour, the Republic of South Africa, where printing is reportedly cheaper, manpower more efficient and the latest, state-of-the-art equipment more abundant. In Harare at least, local competitors are also responding, rising to the occasion to stem the tides of migrations to the South by providing comparable services through harder work and more enhanced creativity.

World Capital

And Harare, without any doubt, became the capital of the world. If for the only reason that for that one month at least the whole world converged at her doorstep. ZIBF became, to adapt a line from Nigerian poet Odi Ofeimun, the huge carcass in the marketplace pulling giant vultures to itself. The list would be endless. But certainly the town of Oxford in the UK emptied itself completely of all its publishers and editors. The more memorable including the energetic veteran, Hans Zell, moving spirit behind the once

famous but now deceased Ife Book Fair, Mary Jay of the African Books Collective (ABC), Katherine Salahi in charge of Bellagio administration in Oxford (wife of renowned artist Ibrahim El Salahi) accompanied by niece, Becky Fishman, an Oxford linguistics graduate and intending Oxford editor-publisher. Then of course Natalie Warren-Green, overseas publisher of Heinemann Group and Terence Cross, Heinemann publishing consultant for Africa complimented by a whole contingent of the Heinemanns. London officials

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like Margaret Ling, managing director of ZIBF UK, Carol Priestley of the Southern African Book Development and Education Trust and Paul Westlake, Hon. Treasurer, International African Institute — all seemed to me to be operating more from the wings, but were indeed active arranging for the diverse consortia and workshops that ran in part prior to the fair, some right into the fair. Priestley for example is also responsible for coordinating the African Periodicals Exhibit (APEX) which promotes African serial publications and journals world-

wide. From the innumerable horde of others were Verlag Holger Ehling a 'long lost' friend, editor of Frankfurt-based African literature journal, Matatu and press officer with the Frankfurt book fair; Peter Ripken, Secretary-General of the society for the promotion of African, Asian and Latin American literatures doubling as representative of the Henrich Boll Foundation; Tade Akin Aina of CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal; Atukwei Okai the Ghanaian poet and Woeli Dekutsey a ZIBF trustee. At a separate event holding in the town, a Commonwealth diplomatic briefing, the world also compassed me about, after I had been securely roped in by my illustrious 'agent' in Harare, the indefatigable Chief Joop Berkout. Fortunately some of the presences would be recognisable too: Emeka Anyaoku of Nigerian origins and Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Tayo Fasoyin formerly University of Lagos professor of international relations currently serving as International Labour Organisation's representative in Zimbabwe.

It was the indaba however that contained the greatest horde of dignitaries where Nigerian writer, Kole Omotoso delivered a keynote address around the 'National book policy, the literate environment and its relationship to national development.' It was not uncommon to start a spirited conversation with a new acquaintance only to discover in the end that he was some cabinet minister in Sierra Leone or Zimbabwe. What was more, it was here that my 'agent' demanded that I lodge a complaint about the momentary detention of the GR copies at Harare Airport with the very person of the Zimbabwean

minister of education!

African Journal Editors

One of the lofty ideas that typified the sixth ZIBF was the African journal editors' workshop, hatched by the International African Institute (IAI). Looking back now, I can testify that the five-day meeting achieved more than its organisers originally intended, which was to enhance what was described as 'good practise in journal publishing.' Even so, Hans Zell, the coordinator of the workshop would in the course of the conference offer a more explicit term for the motivating idea, which was, 'good housekeeping in journal publishing.' Obviously the workshop sprang out of a belief that journals have failed most times in Africa not for want of good editorial input but more for poor management - subscription management more directly but also, poor marketing and promotions and inefficient finance and business plan.

Hans Zell had prior to the workshop prepared a comprehensive handbook on the subject, commissioned by the IAI, with which participants were served in loose leaf format before their arrival in Harare, so that they would have been thoroughly acquainted with the material. This then became the working script on which discussions were built and practical experiences of participating editors compared with those described in the book.

The Harare workshop was to be the second, immediately succeeding a similar workshop for editors and publishers of scientific journals in

Eastern Africa held in Addis Ababa. Harare than concentrated on editors and publishers of social science and cultural and literary journals in Southern Africa. But not without one exception at least. And that is a cultural-literary journal based in Western Africa represented by the present writer.

One of the many marks of the recognition of the value of the gathering was the involvement of some editors who though were not officially invited, came along all the same as observers, word about the meeting having leaked out to them. They include Micheal Cross, editor of the University of Witwatersrand publication, *Perspectives in Education* (South Africa) and Elizabeth Larson who coordinates Consortium for African Scholarly Publishing, Nairobi, Kenya, among others from Tanzania and Zambia.

The workshop exposed the editors to common journal killers which are often very dangerous for the very reason that they are prone to being taken for granted. Even minuscule factors like the way the name of a journal reads on the cover, the publication's size and format also, (in addition to consistency of format) which many were surprised to learn help librarians to determine what publications to select for subscription. The booby-traps in the roadways to a successful publication of journals (especially in Africa) were so varied and could never have come naturally to anyone without the practical, long-standing experience of the coordinator, Hans Zell and his humorous compliment, Roger Stringer who besides being workshop co-instructor, also contributes a chapter in the



Harare high street

handbook on 'Desktop Publishing for Beginners'. Stringer would also, towards the end, give a demonstration on the internet, which was an extension of a workshop session that addressed 'electronic document delivery and electronic publishing-implications and repercussions for African journal publishers.'

The programme was as all-encompassing as it was vigorous, leading most editors convinced that it should have extended over several more days. The needle-eye handbook detail pierced such other vital subjects as, a publishing viability checklist, editorial and style, production (we later had an outdoor session in a pre-press company midtown), indexing and abstracting services and possibilities for non-subscription revenue. It was amazing how much Hans and Roger were prepared to give away considering that they - Hans in particular - are themselves practitioners in the same field yet doling out so freely what we thought were hard-earned, essential trade secrets.

Beyond the immediate gain of injecting life-support insight into the operations of journal publishing was the gain of gathering the editors in one venue and thus making them instant close acquaintances and hopeful future collaborators. They include L. O. Aina, editor *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science*, Gaborone, Botswana; Janet Nyeko of *Review of Southern African Studies*, Lesotho; Steve Chimombo of Wasi, Malawi; Maila Nghidinwa, *Sister Namibia*, Windhoek, Namibia; Walter Chaleka, *Staffrider*, Pretoria, South Africa; Kwame Ninsin, *African Journal of Political Science*, Harare; Lesley Humphrey, *African Publishing Review*, Harare; Sioux Cumming, *Geography Journal of Zimbabwe*, Harare; Ropafadzo Benjamin, *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, Harare; Caroline Boswell, *Legal Forum*, Harare; Godfrey Moyo, *Township Theatre News*, Bulawayo; Sam Matsangaise, *Zambezia*, Harare and Carol Pearce of *The Zimbabwean Review*,

Harare. One of the testimonies to which was a downtown Harare exploration with Carol Pearce and Godfrey Moyo (Carol's brilliant idea) to MBARI, a high-density Harare suburb, days after the workshops and book fair had dispersed, a tour which concluded with a rice-filled stop-over in one of Harare's non-touristic restaurants!

York Road, Greendale

The fair wound up on a most enthusiastic note, despite the initial galz problem. I had paused somewhere to wonder if it was not a conundrum after all, carefully scripted, I imagined, behind one of the desks in the multiplied high-rise government ministry buildings in the city. Or maybe it was the reporter reading too much in. But the affair certainly served the event well in the end, both locally and abroad, bestowing it with a new topicality. How else could it be? The dramatis personae being the government and a local association. What ordinarily would have been an

internal, national affair was thus performed as a dramatic opening glee before a normally fussless meeting of business and scholarly minded individuals from around the

world. I thought if the association had had no problems getting registered in Zimbabwe and as such was recognised as a legal entity, and that long before the fair, why was the

government now choosing the lawns of the book fair gardens to lock shoulders with it, a venue where it knew they would be spied upon by the whole world?

Other subtle wars were fought during the Zimfair however but that did not receive the same amount of publicity. Even as the exhibitors closed shop towards the end, some could be seen scratching off certain little stickers expressing yet another form of protest message. They were to be found everywhere, their message direct and brief: DON'T TAX BOOKS. A campaign I figured was engineered by fellow-sufferers at the airport customs desk.

For most participants the concluding hours were spent in drinks-saturated festivity. They dissolved into small groups and scattered all over: hotel lobbies, Harare gardens and the book fair secretariat. For the Nigerian 'contingent' it meant a motor-ride down to the home of the Mettedens, the Nigerian High Commissioner and his wife, on invitation. There on York Road we were awaited by a robust dinner of sorely missed Nigerian delicacies, led by the chief guest himself, Joop Berkout. But not before 'fluidy' conversation sessions shared joyously by the zestful host and hostess with the diners - Vincent Chukwuemeka Ike the novelist and prominent indaba figure, publishers Lawal Solarin (Literamed, Lagos), Berkout (Spectrum, Ibadan) and Victor Nwankwo (New Dimension, Enugu). The company also consisted of Lagos University bookshop manageress Mrs. Orimolade and daughter, two Nigerian lecturers at the University of Zimbabwe, Tayo Fasoyin of the ILO and a Nigerian diplomatic staff. Even there out in Greendale, we heard echoes from the Atlanta Olympics. It was exactly an hour to the historic last-leg soccer encounter between Nigeria and Argentina. **GR**

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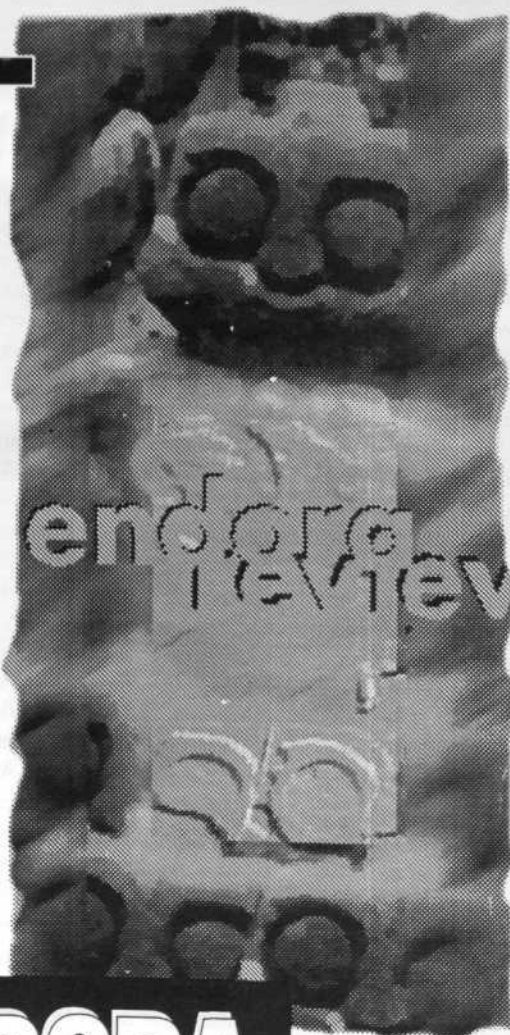
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