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Raphaël Thierry

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Amalion Publishing

AN INTERVIEW WITH SULAIMAN ADEBOWALE

Raphaël
Thierry

Raphaël Thierry How did your publishing career begin? Why did you choose Senegal as a place to publish?

Sulaiman Adebowale I started as a proofreader and reporter at a newspaper house — Triumph Publishing, in Kano, Nigeria. After graduating in English Studies from the University of Lagos in 1992, I was posted about 1,000 kilometres from home to Kano for the then compulsory National Youth Service Corps Programme (NYSC) for a year. The NYSC programme was designed in 1973 to rebuild and reunite the country in the aftermath of the Civil War. Graduates from each state are sent to other states and regions far from their catchment area to inculcate a better understanding of the diversity of Nigeria and its people and to also share expertise across regions as a service to the community, given the varied levels of development across the country. It was and still is an invaluable programme for the country. After the service year, the company offered me a full-time position, which was delightful because I had always wanted to be a journalist and had been fascinated by the field for long.

Unfortunately, it was a really divisive period in Nigeria's history. The annulment of the 12 June 1993 elections created the most fractious terrain for the media, pitting propaganda and bias against objectivity, transparency and every idealistic ethos of what journalism stands for in the face of a really repressive and brutal military regime that left an indelible mark on the country today. It was a soul-destroying moment for me; I could not see myself loving the field, not to speak of surviving it, and I quit in 1994, which was really funny because newspaper and media houses were being shut down or editors imprisoned for the flimsiest of excuses and offences and the last thing you wanted then was to face a shrinking job market. I knew I wanted to continue to work with words, so I did freelance editorial work for some academic journals until I left for Senegal on a fortuitous holiday visit that has not ended two decades later. I worked for several NGOs and research organisations including the Council for the Development of

Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) where I finally got a full-time job as Assistant Editor in 1998. I took some time off in 2001 and 2002 for further studies at the International Centre for Publishing Studies in Oxford Brookes and worked at the Bellagio Publishing Network, an organisation also based in Oxford which was promoting publishing and book development in the south. I came back to CODESRIA until I left in 2008 as the Managing Editor and then created Amalion in 2009.

RT Why did you create your own publishing house? How would you describe Amalion's editorial policy?

SA When I joined CODESRIA, the Council had just three academic journals, a newsletter, monographs and the book series. By 2008, there were four more journals, working papers and a bigger multilingual book series including development studies, sociology, history and higher education among others in a completely different publishing environment with the dominance of the internet and electronic publishing tools for dissemination. The importance of the Council's work can be attested in the numerous African scholars whose work and research have been disseminated the world over and for so long — since 1973! That's no mean feat for an African-based organisation to achieve. Particularly when it was once a battle for the work of scholars based on the continent to be accepted and given the value and acknowledgment they deserved because of so many reasons, but one that we can sum up in the power dynamics in north-south inequalities. CODESRIA, in its research efforts, scholars attending its seminars and contributing to its journals and books, truly helped me understand why it is necessary to publish scientific research by Africans and why it is even more important to do it based in Africa. So from the onset, I knew scholarly publishing would be a strong focus for Amalion and that tapping into the capacity and networks in the social sciences and humanities would be a key background for Amalion's work.

I also knew from the beginning in 2009 that Amalion's focus would have to broaden what constitutes knowledge or scholarly publishing to stand a chance of surviving. I knew



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we had to publish various forms and kinds of knowledge: in stories, fables, folktales, proverbs, customs or rites, whether in poetry, prose fiction or biographies alongside the scholarly monographs. The first aim is to increase the potential market of readers beyond the circle of university and academic or development personnel to include any learned person with a basic secondary or university education. To do this of course the content of what is published must reflect this too. So you don't have to be an economist to understand the issues in Ndikumana and Boyce's *La Dette odieuse de l'Afrique: Comment l'endettement et la fuite des capitaux ont saigné un continent* (2013) or have access to read hundreds of journal articles to read the historical development of a major African group as explored in Stephen Akintoye's *A History of the Yoruba People* (2010) etc. The second and equally pertinent aim is to shift the parameters of what is considered 'knowledge' and which a lot of statistics about knowledge production seem to ignore as regards Africa, although they have a huge impact on how the continent is perceived and understood. As cinema and music have shaped how we see our worlds both far and near, so has literature, fiction in particular. You can't imagine the number of people, for instance, who simply assume they know Nigeria so well simply because they have read Chimamanda Adichie or before her Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka! As a fiction reader we sometimes do not separate fiction from reality. We get immersed so much in the work of a good writer that we inadvertently take what we are reading as facts and knowledge.

Another critical aspect of Amalion's work is the need to be a multilingual publisher. It is inevitable that, to truly capture African writing and experiences, we cannot afford to be monolingual. Because publishing only in one language does not reflect the realities in Africa and it reinforces and

exacerbates postcolonial barriers and frontiers to our understanding of Africa. So we set out to publish both in English and French. Of course it is not easy to do, or still limited, given the tons of other indigenous African languages that are being left out, but it is a step. And we hope to include other languages if projects and opportunities permit us to do so in the future.

RT How many manuscripts do you receive per year? From where are those manuscripts coming?

SA The vast majority of what we publish is based on recommendations from scholars and writers. There is also a window for authors to send us something directly and we receive about twenty to forty requests a year of this type. From those, around four a year end up being reviewed and later published.

RT What is the average print run for Amalion? Who are your bestselling authors and titles?

SA Depending on the title, author and material, we publish just 500 copies for the poetry titles and 1,000, 1,500 and 2,000 copies for the scholarly monographs. There's a book we had to print 5,000 copies of, in order to offset translation rights and costs because we bought the rights from another publisher and needed to keep the unit price down. The top selling titles for us are *A History of the Yoruba People*, *Giving to Help, Helping to Give: The Politics and Contexts of African Philanthropy* (2013) and *La Dette odieuse de l'Afrique*. Based on our print runs, the focus is obviously not on 'bestsellers', but trying to establish the brand as a trusted source for high quality content from Africa, and we go to great lengths to ensure what we produce goes beyond expectations.

RT How do you fund your work?

SA Alongside our publishing work, we also do editorial consultancies for NGOs and other institutions, helping out with project reports and publications, which allows us to cover overheads and produce some of the outstanding authors and titles that we have had the privilege to work on for Amalion's main work. Although we do not market this consultancy side in general, we truly value the work we put into them. Most organisations do not have the editorial capacities to publish these publications effectively and it is a shame, because there is not just a growing body of material from them that can be disseminated if well packaged, these materials also constitute a critical source of scholarship on Africa. During the crises in higher education from the mid-1980s and 1990s as a result of state disinvestment in education, NGOs became an alternative space for African scholars to do research and produce knowledge. Although the situation in some African universities has improved in the last ten years after a series of massive donor-funded initiatives in the higher education sector, material from NGOs is still significant.

RT Are your books in the Senegalese school programmes?

SA I wish! But we do have a title that is on the high-school optional reading programme; it is a classic title first published in 1996 that we got the rights to republish in a new edition, *Le Choix de l'Ori* (2015). The English version is expected in 2016. By the way, we do not aim for Senegal only, but all other countries in Africa. Our authors come from all over the continent, so we hope their works will be adopted as course material. However, we also need to be realistic that the textbook market, not to mention the current terrain, is another focus that requires resources and other capacities which small independent publishers may not have. Since late 2015, Association Sénégalaise des Éditeurs, the publishers' association of Senegal, has begun a training programme to teach its members the technical and administrative know-how necessary to not just produce the relevant textbook material, but also to be able to win tender processes. Without such know-how, multinationals and big publishers will always dominate the textbook market in most African countries.

RT How do you distribute your books? Do digital technologies play a role? Are you represented at book fairs and cultural events (in Senegal and outside)?

SA We use both the traditional and digital distribution models. L'Oiseau Indigo disseminates in France and the Benelux region, Central Books for the United Kingdom, ISBS for America. We also have distributors in Nigeria and work directly with bookshops in various other countries. See our website for more info — <http://www.amalion.net/orderinfo_en/>. We attend conferences and book fairs directly or through our distributor partners and other forums.

We also do e-books but the main distributors – Apple, Amazon and Google Books – currently do not sell to most countries in Africa. This is a big impediment we are still battling with. The options are to use other less known portals that handle order fulfilment and payment services which we can access. Selling e-books directly without the right Digital Right Management (DRM)² is basically giving out free content, which may not be bad in itself if the publisher can look for other models to subsidise or cover the cost of producing the content in the first place.

RT What about the media coverage for your publications?

SA Our titles are well covered and, in addition to traditional media, numerous blogs and author and book forums cover

our titles and authors. We still send books to review outlets such as scholarly journals and general interest publications and trade catalogues as well. The publishing trade is also tricky in that you still need to spend a lot of money to get the right noise, and it does not always work out that the amount of money you spend automatically translates into big sales. It helps but, as in any business dealings, there are unknown variables linked to the right book at the right time or event which could trigger sales. We all pray for that, whether you are publishing in Kathmandu or Timbuktu. The critical thing is having the capacity to be able to capitalise on such events when they happen.

RT What are your priorities in the future?

SA I would like to work more on titles that are truly transnational, whether in content, subject matter or even in the experiences of the authors themselves. It is encouraging that the book industry is beginning to feel the presence of e-commerce on the continent, with several e-commerce platforms such as Jumia in West Africa and Kalahari (now called Takealot) in Southern Africa, for example, selling physical books with local payment options. We hope to collaborate more with those platforms on the continent. We have a long way to go to develop our e-book side further; it is inevitable. We must think much more critically about tapping into the mobile phone market, which is the dominant medium for internet access in our part of the world. Doing this, of course, is not easy without developing content specifically for mobiles. Not all content will fit this format obviously, so some books will remain apt for tablet readers, but we aim to convert those that can.

Notes

- 1 See: P T Zeleza. *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises*. Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997. Also S Adebawale. 'The Scholarly Journal in the Production and Dissemination of Knowledge on Africa: Exploring some issues for the future'. *Africa in the New Millennium*. Ed. Eddy Maloka and Elizabeth Le Roux. South Africa: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2001. 96–113.
- 2 Digital rights managements (DRM): access-control technology used by manufacturers, publishers and copyright holders to limit the usage of digital devices or information. Cf. EC Council. *Computer Forensics: Investigating Network Intrusions and Cyber Crime* (1st ed.). Clifton Park, NY: EC-Council Press, 2009. 9–26.