

The Book Crisis: Africa's Other Famine

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For the past three years the media of the Western world have been full of news about the great famine in Africa. The horrific pictures of the starving in Ethiopia or Mali have resulted in large sums of money being collected from the pockets of the well fed rich of the First World for redistribution to the starving poor of the Third. Bob Geldof's Live Aid concert was not only the most spectacular concert of any kind ever sponsored: it was the most successful one-off fund-raising event ever staged. So much money was raised that Geldof and his colleagues responsible for administering it could not spend it all immediately on supplies for famine relief and began to consider using some of the funds at their disposal for long-term developmental and research projects that would help avert future famines of the kind which still, alas, continue to plague some parts of the African continent. In similar vein, a series of television programmes recently shown in Britain on Channel 4 examined what it called 'The Crisis in Africa' with the difference that it sought, as the blurb for the series put it, to look 'beyond drought, war and the inequalities of world trade to some neglected facts: women grow 80% of Africa's food while tractors, bank loans and fertilizers go to men'.¹ The series put the case for taking women as a key to solving Africa's food crisis. It also examined the value of foreign aid and foreign experts to those they try to help as against local self-help projects. As viewers sat safely by their TV sets watching adverts for new types of cereal available at their bulging local supermarket, no doubt the pictures of skeletal victims of the famine and refugees in whose eyes the light of hope had long since dimmed once more had many of them reaching for their pockets. But at least they were forced to consider the nature of the crisis and its root causes and to understand that food relief will relieve only its symptoms. A much more radical treatment is needed if the cure is to be complete.

In the rethinking that has taken place over the past year about the nature of the famine, and in the debates about its causes and the appropriate remedies for

it, one fact has been dangerously forgotten. And that is that, alongside the food crisis, Africa is beset by a much more insidious famine, and, to continue the medical metaphor, one that is a cancer, unseen, and at first unfelt, which could blight the future of the African continent in a way that a more obviously quickly remediable shortage of food will not. This is of course the terrible dearth of books and other teaching materials that afflicts nearly all African countries south of the Sahara, and which if not remedied soon may mortgage Africa's future for several generations to come. Much less newsworthy, and certainly much less telegenic, than the instant and horrific damage done to the human, animal and agricultural resources of the continent by the present drought, the book famine has already done, and will, unless remedied soon, do incalculable long-term harm to Africa and the ability of its people to deal with the problems that beset it today.

I am old-fashioned enough still to believe that the best help a people can have is self-help, and that the solution to Africa's current crisis, or what the second Conference of African Vice-Chancellors, meeting last year in Swaziland, called the 'rapid deteriorating social and economic conditions' of the continent,² has its best hope in the education of its people. This was certainly the message which most nationalists brought to independence, as exemplified by the ambitious education programmes instituted by such leaders as Nkrumah of Ghana, Nyerere of Tanzania or Awolowo of western Nigeria. And generally there has been enormous expansion of educational resources since independence. Take, for instance, Botswana, where the number of pupils in primary school has nearly trebled since independence twenty years ago.³ And even those leaders, like Nyerere, who have seen the economies of their countries stagger from one crisis to another have insisted on the primacy of education as the solution to their problems. When the International Monetary Fund told him that he would have to divert funds from education to

development, meaning export crops, Nyerere replied that he knew no form of development better than education.⁴ If in Africa today it may seem that education has not been the cure-all that I am suggesting it could be, we must remember that India has shown how a country with the appropriate expertise can solve what appeared to be an insoluble problem. That once famine-stricken continent is now able to feed itself, or at least redistribute its surpluses to famine-stricken areas, and in the achievement Indian as much as foreign experts have played their role. In the case of Africa, most of her countries today have the necessary supply of experts to tackle her problems. And yet the failure to do so has been conspicuous. Why should this have been so? One reason has been the brain drain of these experts abroad. Some have been attracted for purely financial reasons as salaries paid to African academics fall far behind those of the Western world. Others are sent to international agencies to fill national quotas and work in strange countries where their expertise is less valuable than it would have been in their own, with whose special problems they are familiar. Others leave home for purely political reasons. Whatever the cause, many African countries like Ghana and Uganda have lost up to half their potential resources for teaching in the university, and invariably this represents the better qualified half. Much more serious than this brain drain is the situation of those who stay behind. Even if they can eat, they are intellectually starved through lack of books, journals and the chance to travel to other countries to attend conferences or conduct research. As Professor Roland Oliver put it, he and others who have visited Africa have been 'appalled in recent years by the increasing isolation of teachers in African universities, some of whom have not been able to afford to buy a book for many years. Younger lecturers are lecturing from notes they took as students. More senior academics feel, in many instances, they could not offer a paper to an international conference because they have fallen behind in their understanding of the latest research in their own disciplines'.⁵ A parallel situation exists in the secondary schools of many countries. British parents may have been horrified by a recent programme on the state of public education in their country compared

with private education. In some State schools students are having to share textbooks, one between four, while scientific equipment has to be pooled among schools. But compared with their African counterparts they are blessed. In 1982 Lalage Bown reported that textbooks in Ugandan schools had been handed down from one class of pupils to the next for the past ten years. Many school libraries had not had a new book since 1972. Many libraries had been destroyed during the on-going civil war. The cost of a teacher's handbook for Primary Social Studies was half a week's pay for that teacher.⁶ It may be said that Uganda is a special case. But at a recent symposium on 'The Book Famine in Africa', sponsored by the International African Institute in London, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone, Dr Arthur Porter, reported on 'the dreadful lack of books and indeed much other equipment in schools and universities in the country'. He stressed the feelings of despair and discouragement felt by many of the teachers in such institutions. Salaries were so low and equipment so badly lacking that there were many who could not afford the luxury of writing and research. He, too, cited the case of a professor at his university who was embarrassed to accept an invitation to an international conference because he knew he was out of touch with recent developments in his discipline. Dr Porter concluded, 'Although the food famine had been given much publicity, the long-term effect of the shortage of books and educational aids was quite devastating.'⁷

The book famine, alas, has hit all levels in the educational systems of sub-Saharan Africa. Lack of textbooks in primary schools has a deleterious effect on the quality of students entering the secondary system, while a similar lack of books and equipment there has a deleterious multiplier effect on those entering the university system, where textbooks and reference books are in short supply, and where teachers are often so demoralised or preoccupied with outside businesses to supplement their incomes that the education they offer — at one time in universities like Ibadan and Makerere as good as one could get in Europe or America — is falling back to the standard of rural junior colleges in the Deep South of the United States before the second world war. Even relatively fortunate

universities like the young University of Botswana, once almost unable to spend its annual book budget, now, just as its new library has been completed, has had to cut back purchases by 10% because of the fall in the value of the rand, to which Botswana's currency is tied. The University of Malawi had only a few thousand kwacha last year for book purchases for the Chancellor College library. The miracle was how well students there were taught and how up-to-date lecturers still were with their reading. At great sacrifice they, like lecturers in other African countries suffering similar financial constraints, import books at their own expense. But what a cost that is. Paul Richards recently pointed out that a lecturer at Fourah Bay College would have to spend a week's salary to buy a quite modestly priced book.⁸ Similarly a book at £10 sterling would in Uganda cost a lecturer at Makerere the equivalent of his month's salary.⁹

The net result has been, then, that teachers and students have been cut off from new developments in other African countries as well as the outside world, both in the sciences and the humanities.

The difficulties of selling books in Africa have had the further deleterious effect that publishers are less and less willing to undertake publication of anything but the sure-fire textbook. The number of publishers willing to take on the financing of a monograph on Africa is very small today. Peter Warwick of Longman recently pointed out that ten years ago a revised PhD thesis might be published in a 2,000 print run of which 25% would sell in sub-Saharan Africa at £10 a copy with a paperback reprint of which 90% would sell in sub-Saharan Africa. By 1980 only 1,250 of such a monograph would be printed, at a price of £15-£20. Then a mere 10% would sell in sub-Saharan Africa. Only if it were assigned as a textbook would it be reprinted in paperback, and then 50% of the sales would be in Nigeria. Today such a project would not be viable without a firm US library sale or a subsidy.¹⁰ Similarly Hans Zell reported that reference books which a few years back would sell 2,000 copies now sell between 700 and 800 copies, and sometimes less, 'and this was due largely to the virtual collapse of the African markets'.¹¹

This means that the latest results of research, whether by African or European scholars, are increasingly

difficult to have published, and, even when they are, rarely reach the libraries of the continent with which they deal. Indeed, as James Currey has put it, scholars and writers both inside and outside Africa are 'giving up all hope of being published'.¹²

Of course there is publishing taking place in African countries, and in a sense there is a reverse famine of Africa-published books in Britain, as the recent workshop for African publishers organised in October 1985 in London underlined. They ~~indeed~~ have set up a task force to see how they can promote greater exports of their books both within the African continent and abroad.¹³

The consequences of this book famine and other financial ~~re~~straints on scholarship are multifarious. The first that must concern scholars of Africa both within ~~the~~ outside the continent is that the community of Africanists that developed in the 1960s without respect to provenance is divided (as though independence had never taken place) into two separate compartmentalised worlds, as Lalage Bown has so aptly put it. There are now African Africanists and foreign Africanists, and we have reached a stage, she said of British Africanists, 'when we are like the Soviets used to be, when there used to be Africanists who had never set foot in Africa and never met an African'.¹⁴

Conversely there is an increasing sense of isolation among Africanists in Africa, who are slipping back from leadership in the disciplines they came to dominate in the '60s. This is reflected in international journals such as *African Affairs*, which, despite the fact that it has a good number of African scholars on its editorial board, has been experiencing 'an increasing feeling of desperation' in its attempts to get more Africa-based scholars to contribute articles to the journal.¹⁵ The same has been true of the *Journal of African History and Africa*.

One reaction to this isolation is a growing resentment against the scholars of the better-off Western world. Thus at the second Conference of African Vice-Chancellors in Swaziland delegate after delegate advocated 'definking' from the European and American universities with which they were associated or on which they were modelled. The general consensus was that African universities had to devise models of their own, cooperate among themselves rather than with overseas universities, and generally

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become more self-reliant.¹⁶ While such sentiments are at one level laudable, at another they will serve only to exacerbate the isolation of African scholars from the main currents of disciplines in both the humanities and the sciences. The foundations for building up mutual co-operation and self-reliance are insubstantial when foreign exchange for travel is in short supply or non-existent, and when libraries are short of books, though few of them are in such a desperate state as that of Makerere, where the existing holdings were being defended with barbed wire because the librarian and his colleagues found pages of scientific journals being used to wrap groundnuts in the market: library attendants had sold off books for the value of the paper to supplement their abysmally low wages.¹⁷

Of course the problem does not extend only to books but to all forms of educational equipment. Lack of scientific equipment has meant that the headway being made in science and medicine in Ibadan and Makerere in the '60s has been seriously eroded in the '70s and in many cases become non-existent in the '80s. Many universities have lost their ability to make contributions in the theoretical and even the applied sciences, and therefore to the solution of the continent's problems.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the computer revolution. While students in secondary schools in America and Britain take the computer — our new form of literacy — for granted, large numbers of African universities either have no computer systems or else such as they have are outdated or broken down. Thus both staff and students lag behind in the most fundamental scientific and information revolution to take place in the second half of the twentieth century.

The ultimate consequence of all this is that Africa is in serious danger of falling behind Europe in terms of scientific and technological education and innovation, recreating thereby the gap between the two that existed at the time of the European occupation in the late nineteenth century. The starry '60s when the young African universities seemed to be joining the international academic community on equal terms have given way to our current decade of despair where African universities slip faster and faster behind their European and American counterparts. African

scholars of international repute, particularly in the sciences, seek employment abroad and once again Africa has to import outside experts to seek solutions to its problems. Yet as Paul Richards has so effectively shown in his *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution* many of the most successful innovations in food crop production in the past half-century have come not from the plentiful plans of the foreign experts but from indigenous resourcefulness. As he stresses there should be more emphasis on fostering and supporting local adaptation and inventiveness,¹⁸ and who better to do that than indigenous 'experts' who know their own land and their people?

Is there any remedy to the deteriorating situation with regard to teaching materials and books in the African universities and other institutions of learning, whether primary school or polytechnic? There have been a number of brave attempts, ranging from the small but important gesture of the Royal African Society supplying a hundred free copies of *African Affairs* to libraries in Africa to the larger-scale exercises of the ELBS, Books for Development, the ODA/British Council Book Presentation Scheme and the World Bank scheme for Uganda.¹⁹ But these only scratch at the surface of the problem. What must be done is to persuade the aid-giving agencies and charitable organisations concerned with Africa that while it is one thing to cure the immediate cause of famine by sending food it is quite another to have a long-term solution to it, and that this can only really come, as the African Vice-Chancellors in Swaziland put it so forcefully, from a self-regenerating process in Africa itself.²⁰ Africa has the brains and manpower to solve its problems. But it does not have the wherewithal in the form of basic educational and research equipment, and most obviously in the form of books relating to the most recent developments in science and technology. The need to nourish the minds of the new generations of Africa is as urgent as feeding their bodies. They must have books as well as bread, access to computers as well as corn, if they are not to form a continent of second-class citizens, differentiated from the rest of the world by the backwardness and irrelevance of their education. There is a real danger of Africa becoming a dark continent of the mind or, as Hans Zell put it, a

'bookless' continent.²¹ It should be a priority of aid to combat the famine that will scar the minds of the young Africa as surely as lack of wherewithal to eat has scarred so many of their young bodies.

Notes

This survey is based on an address given to the twenty-fourth annual general meeting of the Standing Conference on Library Materials for Africa, London, 1986.

1. Channel 4 television, World Wise '86: 'Man-made famine', Sunday, 4 May 1986.
2. Second ECA/AAU Conference of Vice-Chancellors, Presidents and Rectors of Institutes of Higher Learning in Africa, Mbabane, Swaziland, 18-22 February 1985.
3. See G.K.T. Chiepe 'Botswana's development strategy since independence', in Michael Crowder (ed.), *Education for Development in Botswana*, Gaborone, Botswana Society, and London, Macmillan, 1984, pp. 53-8.
4. Julius Nyerere, quoted by William E. Smith in 'A reporter at large: transition', *New Yorker*, 3 March 1986.
5. Report on the Proceedings of a One-day Symposium on 'The Book Famine in Africa' held on 14 October 1985 by the International African Institute, London, pp. 3-4.
6. Lalage Bown, *Books and Education in Uganda, Report for Books for Development*, 1982, p. 1.
7. IAI Report on 'The Book Famine in Africa', p. 1.
8. Personal communication.
9. Bown, *Books and Education in Uganda*, p. 1.
10. IAI Report on 'The Book Famine in Africa', p. 6.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
12. Kaye Whiteman, 'African Studies in peril', *West Africa*, 14 April 1986, p. 781.
13. African Books Collective, launched at Bookweek Africa, London, 1985. For further details write to Hans Zell, Oxford.
14. Kaye Whiteman, *loc. cit.*
15. Michael Twaddle, former editor of *African Affairs*, in IAI Report on 'The Book Famine in Africa', p. 5.
16. Second ECA/AAU Conference of Vice-Chancellors, Mbabane, 1985.
17. Bown, *Books and Education in Uganda*, p. 2.
18. Paul Richards, *Indigenous*

Agricultural Revolution: ecology and food production in West Africa, London, Hutchinson, 1985.

19. See the IAI Report on 'The Book Famine in Africa' for full details of these efforts.
20. Second ECA/AAU Conference of Vice-Chancellors, Mbabane, 1985.
21. IAI Report on 'The Book Famine in Africa', p. 9.

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International African
Bibliography, Manchester
 University Press, 1986.

