

**Academic and Non Fiction Authorship in
Uganda: Paper presented to writers at the Seminar held in
Statistics House Kampala**

On the 3rd October 2013/ By Prof. J.R. Ikoja Odongo

Chairperson

Distinguished Visitors to Uganda

Academic Authors

Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all allow me express my gratitude to Professor Elisam Magara for inviting me to this Seminar. Similarly I wish to express my thanks to the organization that sponsored the seminar and the organizers as well. It is refreshing that we are coming back to this subject of writing once more.

Mr. Chairman, a seminar such as this one is a welcome development because it tasks my mind to come back to academic way of thinking. The theme of the seminar “*Making/Earning a living through Academic and Non-fiction Authorship*” falls within those areas I have a lot of interest and contribution. The theme merits a question: how do I earn a living in writing when experience informs it is not

easy? Ood because as writers or academicians we are supposed to debate issues, raise ideas that should support our way to making money from writing.

As I begin I find it useful to guide my presentation with a reason or perhaps an aim. My presentation intends to examine the state of academic and nonfiction authorship in Uganda. For that aim to mature, I provide some guiding questions:

- a) Do we clearly demarcate what academic and nonfiction writing is?
- b) What are the distinguishing features of academic and nonfiction writing?
- c) How do we assess the presence of this area of writing?
- d) What challenges do we see or experience in academic and nonfiction authorship in Uganda?
- e) What opportunities are there?
- f) How should be proceed with ensuring this sector of writing is boosted?

Chairperson, academic authorship like non-fiction authorship is nothing strange but is about the role and contribution of writers to the origination and the publishing of products we use in teaching and learning especially at tertiary and university level of education on the one hand and secondary and primary education on the other. It is about writing functional books. Books or products getting of this exercise are written and published to disseminate information for advancing

knowledge and education either through general reading or through teaching its content. The manner they are written shows the way knowledge is parceled or arranged and how it has to be learnt. For instance a textbook as non-fiction is divided into chapters allocating progression of knowledge. If it were a play, it would be scenes, sections or other ways that the play is executed, what needs to be mastered and the value of the play. Examples abound giving methodologies for using academic and non-fiction books. But the most important thing is that academic and non-fiction are meant to supply information or knowledge. How both are used is always explained in the preliminary pages of each book. A reader is always advised to consider reading the preliminary or introduction pages why a particular book is written, the benefits to be gained from reading it, and what one needs to do to gain from a particular book.

To understand well that sector of writing it is essential that we distinguish them. These are: writing for books, contributing articles for journals, producing topos for cadastral maps, and writing stories, opinions and reporting events for newspapers. In the academics we classify the manuscripts for books such as textbooks or story, reference, journals etc. For this seminar we narrow ourselves to academic and non-fiction authorship. It is these that we are concentrating on or evaluating vis-à-vis other areas of writing and publishing namely fiction, or trade.

From this perspective statistics would provide a good picture to gauge whether or not Uganda is advancing in academic and non-fiction authorship. Unfortunately it is difficult to get this information.

Because it is pretty difficult to assess the quantity and quality of what is not written, judgment can be done via published products. I ask you to briefly migrate and position your mental resources to the current Literary Market Place (LMP) in our country whether in bookshops, school, academic or public library or classroom or university press. These are institutions for books, journals and to some extent products in scientific and popular magazines and in different languages. Here we judge from the presence of the products on library shelves, publishers' catalogues, bookshop shelves, students' reading lists and university presses (University Publishing Houses) publishing lists.

Beginning with the last one, I cannot recognize that there is any. Even Makerere University whose life stretches years back does not have a

university press. Publishers' catalogues are beginning to appear on our publishing scene because most writers anchor on non-fiction as essential material for secondary and primary textbook market. Students reading lists of essential texts are slowly and surely disappearing from institutions precisely due to non-commitment of lecturers to compile them or having nothing new to add to the old lists. Bookshops have limited supplies to call for lists. Only those in Kampala such as Aristock or Fountain Publishers have a resemblance of fairly well stocked bookshops that have some kind of lists in the heads of assistants. Academic or tertiary or even school libraries shelves are a recreation of foreign presses products and individual academic writers such as Oxford University press, Cambridge University Press or John Hopkins University Press. This is not bad but how can we develop our own knowledge systems and yet rely on foreign press?

Commercial Publishers like Fountain Publishers, MK publishers are perhaps among the only few that have engaged authors to write non-fiction works. Their books-in-print provide evidence for this. What I have concentrated above are books. What about journals?

Mr. Chairman this is perhaps an area where academic authorship could be fairly present. However in Uganda, journals such as mawazo are few and many of them are facing extinction if they are already not so for lack of money to contribute to their existence. Many depend on foreign sponsorship for the publication. Non-fiction for secondary and primary schools as the bread and butter of publishing is where authors struggle

to get published. This is because the Ministry of Education and Sports pays for these levels of books.

It is in foreign journals that we try to see academic authors by their output because of pressure to publish or perish. Most disturbing here is that many likely readers cannot see these papers despite the fact that these publications are foreign languages we hardly know well. They are widely scattered across the globe. Libraries are also withdrawing from procuring them due to high cost, large number of titles and unlikely infinite readership. Of course a good reason to avoid such are the emergence of e-resources most of which are free, encouragement of use of PCs to access information on internet and a trend that owning a tablet is trendy than carrying paper. Looked at it other ways the most visible way is to count how many academics have been promoted as a result of writing and publishing? Not many.

Mr. Chairman in totality there is a scarcity of academic and nonfiction writing at University and tertiary institutions level and a growing informal publishing for secondary and primary education. We are facing information hunger. Although many tertiary and universities are centres of excellence where academic writing is expected to blossom, the country is like desert islands which are surrounded by the readers but there is limited supply in the oasis. The reading habit and purchasing powers are pathetically limited and being eroded by entertainment offered by creative industries.

Testing the country's contribution to Literary Market Place (LMP) would reveal that our unit per capita consumption of paper is less than 1kg annually while developed countries are well above 6 kg of reading materials. The position could be worse in terms of ownership of PCs or the services ICT provides.

Without despairing, I can argue that some milestones have been registered. There have been academic authors who have been able to write and publish. Bookshops such as; Aristock, and Fountain Publishers provide evidence on their shelves. Projects like I@Mak at Makerere University was a good example that has also closed.

While the picture of academic and nonfiction authorship is weak, it is important in a seminar such as this that we examine the challenges authors are facing. It is perhaps the reason we are gathered here to seek solutions. We need to be very pragmatic. I have already commented on some of these challenges. However allow me mention others. This may enable us suggest strategies that help turn around the future of academic and non-fiction authorship.

The time I have been dealing with writing and discussing with academic friends the many who would be writing express challenges like; lack of skills in writing, limited time for writing, not knowing what to write about, conflict of interest between poverty and sitting down to write, no body to read what I write, fear of being caught over plagiarism, limited publishing opportunities, writing being a non paying venture, very low purchasing power and culture of reading;

inadequate recognition of authorship; takes too long to get published, and some publishers ask authors to pay part of the cost to get their work through, academic literacy which is a premium to authorship is grossly inadequate, capacity building in writing is almost non-existent, no favourable publishing policies, co-publishing opportunities are limited, quality research is also small, lack of data where to off from disables judgement of the sector, making English as the most leading language of writing has also created fear or guilt giving the Europeans leading advantage. It is also been stated that peer reviewing is biased to white authors standards. African intellectual traditions are weak. Lecturers are not models of knowledge. Popular culture has taken over scholarship. The list is too long.

Ondari Okema (2007) provides evidence of this stating that several development indicators including *World Development Report*, *World Competiveness Yearbook* and *the Technology Achievement Index*, do not paint a rosy picture of social economic and technological development in sub-Saharan Africa. This supports what Castles (1998) described, classified and attributed this position to economic, political and social decline in Africa during the rise of information/global economy. He stated that unreliable institutional environments, lack of production and communication infrastructure; and erroneous economic policies were responsible.

The economic factors were that most authors including scholars worked in a depressing environment where institutions were not well funded to generate new knowledge; libraries were poorly funded and continue to

experience budgetary cuts every year. Laboratories to conduct experiments in order to generate findings for eventual publication lacked up to date research facilities while inadequate access to internet made life of academicians even more difficult.

Lack of incentives cost universities dearly. Research funding is limited, many universities are experiencing escalating enrollment a factor that kills a lecturer time and incentive to research and the emoluments of lecturers have remained stagnant or becoming lower every other year another factor making these institutions rather teaching centres.

Attending academic conferences is crucial to writing manuscripts or writing academic papers. But employers cannot afford to sponsor many of their staff or staff is too poor to pay for themselves. Non participation in conferences denies such staff an opportunity to present their work to peers who would have encouraged publication of the best works.

Brain drain is a result of poor working conditions. Reasons for brain drain include low salaries and wages, social unrest, political conflicts and declining quality of education systems, poor research facilities. Consequence of this is that many academicians migrate and publish abroad.

Language as a vehicle of communication is a big problem in Africa as Jaygbay (1998) states inadequate knowledge or mastery of foreign languages including English locks out half of Africa population in writing and publishing. This brings in the problem of lack of editors, sub editors, illustrators etc.

Technological challenges include lack of technological capability to support electronic knowledge transfer and publishing. ICT is still underdeveloped. Because of these challenges Internet connectivity is poor. Knowledge production and consumption in institutions of higher learning is and will remain low. Electronic journal which are now available accept manuscripts electronically if they are to peer reviewed. However many would be writers do not have PCs, or email addresses and the Internet. Therefore may not be able to send, review or read them on time required.

Environmental challenges also affect academic authors as well as non-fiction writers. Limited freedom of speech or writing affects free flow of ideas. Censorship sometimes leads to treasonable acts by authority. This compromises authorship.

However, we are not here to stay put and lament. We need knowledge and writers must be encouraged to write more and more. There should be serious effort towards revitalizing authorship as an industry that requires a lot of reforms and support. Solutions could come from policy shifts, mentoring, collaboration, continuous writing and publishing education, access to small research grants.

The start has been made here but we need serious change in our mindset and start believing it is possible to earn money from writing. UPE and USE provide a good market. Escalating number of Universities and tertiary institutions are also a good market. Growing

influence of ICT could be taken advantage of in our policy strategies. There is need for continuous discussion with all who matter.

Authors could also be institutionally rewarded monetarily since sabbatical leave means little to them. Deliberate efforts in training authors should be supported by associations; instituting and funding manuscripts evaluation and academic boards is a useful proposal, unlocking university's presses potential and encouraging collaboration with private publishers to promote writing of identified manuscripts and many others can be formidable ways of encouraging authorship. It would be a good idea that seminars such as this one review and renew the support to the Publisher's Association used to have with APNET or Uganda Textbook and Nonfiction Authors Association. It would also be a useful proposal to encourage Universities to have programmes on different aspects of training in authorship or origination, editing, printing and marketing and distribution.

References

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