

## **Book donation programmes for Africa: Time for a Reappraisal? Two Perspectives**

Part 2: **Raphaël Thierry**: “Book donations, but at what price, and in exchange for what? An overview on book donation practice in francophone Africa” (In French)

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**Extract from the editorial note of the print issue:**

### ***FROM THE EDITOR***

*Welcome to this bumper issue of ARD. Scolma is grateful to Hans Zell and Raphaël Thierry for choosing to publish their full length study of Book Donation Programmes in Africa in our pages. It is as they say “time for a reappraisal” and it is our hope that the ensuing debate will take place in the pages of ARD as well as online. I would therefore invite responses and feedback to this important and provocative study. Feedback from receiving libraries in Africa is particularly welcome.*

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### **Summary:**

Because of their diversity and multiplicity book donations programmes in Africa have, over the last two decades, generated much analysis, debate and criticism, and have also led to proposals for good practice. Initiated by UNESCO and the French association Culture et Développement, a new concept of ‘correct donation’ has emerged during this period. A central element of such correct or appropriate donations relates to the inclusion of local publishing output. This raises an important question: if there is in fact an active local publishing industry in Africa, how then should there be a need to ship such a huge number of books from overseas to relieve the ‘book famine’ in Africa? The basic motivation for book donations is that books produced in the countries of the North are plentiful, but that there are not enough of them in Africa. Thus it would seem to be both fair and desirable to redistribute these resources more equitably. But is it right to do so without taking into account African publishers’ historic presence?

In this article I consider the relationship between book donations and the publishing markets in francophone Africa. My aim is to analyse the evolution of North/South relations through its book markets. As I point out, the intensification of donations and distribution of books is grounded in the belief that there are “no books in Africa”, and it coincides with the emergence of the so-called ‘publishing globalization’ in the early 1980s. I also note that this period saw the implementation of the structural adjustment programmes (SAP) under the well-known Bretton-Woods system and policies. In subsequent years, the publishing sector was among the first affected by the austerity measures imposed by international donors.

Is there not then a collusion between book donations, the globalization of the book, and structural adjustment? Until the advent of ‘correct donation’, did structural adjustment adversely affect capitalization of the African book industries? Similarly, as globalization and the growth of overseas book donations met a counter movement dedicated to promote an African publishing presence in the North – to preserve its economic and symbolic interests ‘livre equitable’, co-publishing solidarity, etc. – another movement encouraging ‘correct donation’ has taken on more and more weight, and has contributed to a rethinking of many book donation practices.

As I note in the article, book donations imported through a variety of agencies and organizations occupies a historic place in francophone Africa, and has contributed to an omnipresence of Northern publishers. Meanwhile African publishers' output is usually limited to perhaps 10% of the books stocked and available for sale in local bookshops. And it is the same picture for school textbooks, heavily dominated and monopolized by, and over 80% the products of foreign publishers, mostly French.

One of the most common arguments justifying book donations in Africa is that there are no, or not enough books available locally. But in fact it is perhaps the opposite: there is a foreign publishing monopoly, which does not permit African books reaching out far enough, and to be widely known internationally. Book donations are the end of a chain leading to a minorization process: it contributes to the under-representation and the depreciation of African book production, conveying an image of a publishing wasteland. But just as this view is perhaps simplistic, it is equally simplistic to limit donations to a strictly egalitarian process as part of an economic and ideological system of cultural domination: it is precisely this aspect which makes an analysis of book aid so interesting.

In this article I provide an analysis of book donation practices and its different models in francophone Africa. As I demonstrate, this development is intrinsically linked to an institutional history of cooperative relations between African countries and international agencies since the dawn of independence. This period in the late 1950s and early 1960s initially witnessed separate structural and cultural development, before the emergence of an idea of 'culture as a condition for economic development'.

As I point it out in my paper, the African publishing houses that were initially set up were primarily designed to facilitate the importation of foreign books from publishers in France, through both commercial and philanthropic organizations. However, this flow of books was only able to grow through the development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation dedicated to promoting a culture of reading. Moreover, book donations reached a new stage with the rise of book surplus monitoring, particularly through the 'désherbage en bibliothèque' (library collection weeding policies) in France in the 1980s. Therefore, it is a little bit ironic that better resource management in France has, albeit indirectly, led in turn to book donation excess, and consequently to a different-faced deregulation of the book chain in francophone Africa. I also examine another development in the 1990s, which relates to a part of the institutional discourses, and the development of more reciprocal cooperation, reflecting local realities and the dynamics of decentralization in the library world.

Prompted by the publishing movement of "*Bibliodiversidad*" (or "*Bibliodiversité*") more thoughtful donation practises then seemed to have evolved naturally as from the late 1990s. Other forms of cooperation and a new publishing dynamics emerging from this period led to a remapping of North/South philanthropy dedicated to book donations. This development was supported by UNESCO's declarations and its *Charter on book aid*, and by the strengthening of the management structures, and capacity building, to assist the African book industries by way of multilateral cooperation (via the EU in particular), as well as by establishing collaborative networks. 5

These developments should, in principle, have led to a more enlightened practice of healthier and more appropriate book donations in the francophone countries of Africa. However there then followed a surprising decline of these collaborative networks from the mid-2000 period. While attaching more and more importance to the existence of indigenous resources and local expertise, NGOs are nowadays becoming increasingly central in the book donation field (especially in digital formats), motivated by a logic which until then principally belonged to the field of foreign cooperation. Is that not a new form of substitution? But, as I point out, such substitution will depend of the level of dialogue and collaboration the NGOs will establish with the book professions in Africa. This underlines the need for an understanding by these NGOs of the local book chain in the countries in which they work, and having a proper grasp of the local publishing dynamics.

In my article, together with the Appendix and similarly to [Hans Zell's Part 1 contribution](#), I examine the policies and practices of several book organizations that operate in the francophone countries of Africa, investigating whether their activities take into account the local book industries and the book chain. I also seek to investigate whether wildly inappropriate book donations still continue to flood francophone Africa with huge quantities of foreign books. Donations that are not based on a proper analysis of the situation on the ground, and are more related to a wish to be helpful through book aid, even if ultimately the donations don't actually meet a genuine need. Finally, I suggest that all those involved in book donation programmes should always be mindful of the enormous economic imbalance that exists between publishing in the countries of the North and the book industries in Africa; an unequal playing field that has lasted over the last seven decades at least.

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Pre-print versions available on *Academia.edu* :

**Part 1** by Hans Zell : "Book Donation Programmes in English-speaking Africa":

[https://www.academia.edu/13165497/Book\\_Donation\\_Programmes\\_for\\_Africa\\_Time\\_for\\_a\\_Reappraisal\\_Part\\_I](https://www.academia.edu/13165497/Book_Donation_Programmes_for_Africa_Time_for_a_Reappraisal_Part_I)

**Part 2** by Raphaël Thierry: "le don de livre, mais à quel prix, et en échange de quoi? (un panorama du don de livre en Afrique francophone)":

[https://www.academia.edu/13166294/Le\\_don\\_de\\_livre\\_mais\\_%C3%A0\\_quel\\_prix\\_et\\_en\\_%C3%A9change\\_de\\_quoi\\_Book\\_donation\\_programmes\\_for\\_Africa\\_part\\_2](https://www.academia.edu/13166294/Le_don_de_livre_mais_%C3%A0_quel_prix_et_en_%C3%A9change_de_quoi_Book_donation_programmes_for_Africa_part_2)