

Interview with

Bankole Olayebi



BOOKCRAFT
...a whole new world of books!

A Bachelors degree in Theatre Arts & Literature from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, South-West Nigeria and a Masters degree in Film Production from Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK, have equipped Bankole Olayebi for the leadership of Bookcraft, a high-profile publishing firm based in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. An Edo State man despite his Yoruba name, Olayebi brings to his publications, the influence of his early experience as arts, culture and lifestyle producer at Edo State Broadcasting Corporation. When I look at Bookcraft products, their presentation and packaging speak of an 'eye' well-trained in the glamour of show business. But ultimately, what sets Bookcraft apart is its list of illustrious authors which includes Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka and behemoth of literature, Chinua Achebe. A career that straddles two generations has seen Olayebi spend valuable time at Spectrum Books, the publishing leader of 1980s Nigeria spearheaded by Dutchman, Chief Joop Berkhout with a group of Nigerian investors. Bankole Olayebi and I met in 2010 when I served as moderator for Lagos readings delivered by Bookcraft author and catholic priest, Uwem Akpan, who shot to international fame with his award winning novel and Oprah Book Pick, *'Say You're One Of Them'*.

When was Bookcraft founded and what inspired its conception?

Bookcraft was founded in December 1988. The main idea behind the company's founding, was to provide books for the non-school, general reader, as against strictly educational books. Beyond that, the idea was to help develop an affinity for reading, and to create attractive, quality, well-finished books which people would love to own, and have on their shelves or coffee tables.

Publishing is demanding work. What challenges and joys also, did you experience at the foundation stage?

We started with a lot of energy, enthusiasm and perhaps, idealism. We were still young, and full of belief in our abilities, and what we could achieve. Shortly after the company took off though, we had what can be described as something of a reality check, when the Babangida government introduced SAP, resulting in the devaluation of the Naira relative to the US dollar. Suddenly, almost overnight, the value of our financial resources was reduced to less than a quarter of what it had been only a few weeks before! Needless to say, all our plans and projections went out the window! But when we published our first two books, people's reactions quickly convinced us that perhaps there was an audience for our books. This was what brought us joy, and it is certainly what has sustained us through the challenges and difficulties of the last three decades.

Now that you are well-established, what challenges and joys do you face?

Now, nearly thirty years later, I wish we could say that all the challenges have been taken care of. Indeed today, in some respects, the challenges have even become more acute. Not the least of course, is that the business environment has not gotten much better for entrepreneurs over the years. But more specific to the publishing business though is the dearth of qualified and well-trained, publishing professionals — book packagers and designers, editors, proofreaders, and others who understand how the book business should work. It seems to me that over the years regrettably, not enough time and effort has been invested in the training of publishing professionals. The result is that today, it has become very difficult to find the right people to fill various roles; and it's not very easy to find people to train for these roles. It seems that many young people nowadays are not interested in a career, but only in making money, and quickly. Despite these challenges however, it is always rewarding at the end of the process, to see the finished product and to see the pleasure it brings to the reader. This in my view as a publisher, is invaluable.

Bookcraft specialises in a broad range of genres: fiction, non-fiction, pocket gift books and coffee table art books, historical accounts and more. Are you author driven, or subject driven, or like me, pulled in by exciting titles? How do you choose your manuscripts?

I think it's probably fair to say that we're largely subject-driven. We're always looking for something new, something different, something that can be packaged in an interesting way. But sometimes, you find a unique author. Otherwise, we are looking for the book that can reach a cross-section of the public.

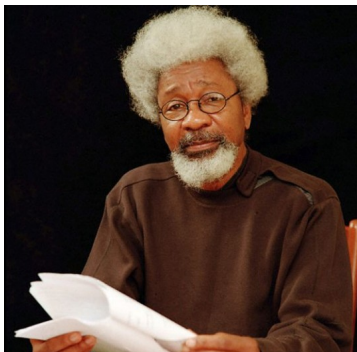
In what ways do you as a publisher interface with other publishers, book industry practitioners and academic institutions? Are there established platforms for industry interactions?

Primarily through book fairs, conferences and at other book events.

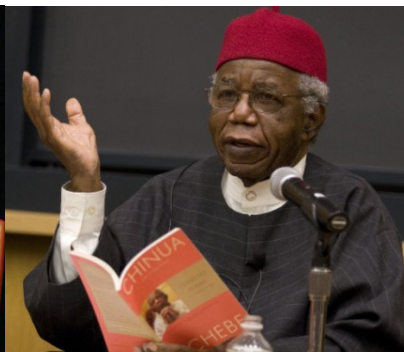
You have an e-publishing division. Do you plan to pursue digital publishing in a major way going forward? Might it even out-do print publishing at Bookcraft one day soon?

We have certainly gone into e-book publishing, but I do not see e-books completely supplanting print book, anytime in the immediate future. I believe that print, or physical books will always be with us. Even in the US and in Europe, the advent of the e-book has not resulted in the death of the print book, as some people were so quick to predict, a few years ago! To paraphrase Mark Twain, ‘reports of the death of the print book have been grossly exaggerated.’

Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan, J.P. Clark, Kole Omotoso, Michael Peel, Ambassador John Campbell, Jess Castellote. The author list at Bookcraft is international and impressive. Beyond the writing, as a personality, which author has made the most impact on you?



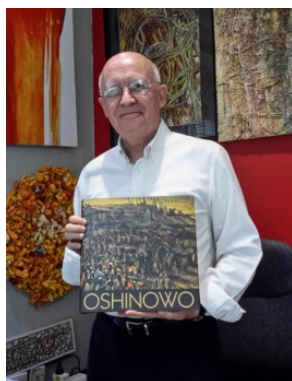
Prof. Wole Soyinka



Prof. Chinua Achebe



Prof. Biodun Jeyifo



Jess Castellote



Michael Peel



*US Ambassador,
John Campbell*



Prof. Femi Osofisan

Prof. J. P. Clark

Prof. Kole Omotosho

Naturally, some authors, either by virtue of their work, or the strength of their personalities, leave you with an unforgettable experience. Nevertheless, I believe that as a publisher, you learn something from every book, and every author — even first-time authors. Having said that though, it is probably true that Wole Soyinka has certainly obviously, made the most remarkable impact on me personally, and indeed on the company. He was my teacher in university, and I had the opportunity to learn quite a bit from him, I believe. And today, as I've become his publisher, I continue to learn from him. Indeed, the privilege of being able to sit with him and talk about his work, and a whole range of subjects - that is priceless.

Only a few of the new generation — the 4th generation of female writers — Chioma Okereke, Yewande Omotoso, Dayo Olopade — feature on your author list. Does this show a preference for masculine writing?



Dayo Olopade

Chioma Okereke

Yewande Omotosho

Absolutely not. If you'll pardon the expression, we are 'gender-neutral'. We are looking for new writers all the time, new, original and exciting material — from young and old, male or female. We certainly do not discriminate. As long as the material is good, and there's a market for it, we'll publish.

My last question: At this stage in its history, what intervention is urgently needed, (from government, a tertiary education institution, even a philanthropist, or a combination of stakeholders such as these) to strengthen the Nigerian book industry?

This is certainly a huge undertaking, and it is going to require the involvement or contribution of the entire gamut of 'stakeholders' — government, the private sector, academic institutions NGOs, philanthropists even — in order to put the

industry back on its feet. Indeed, it seems to me that we have got to start from scratch and build the industry back. There's no question that the book industry as a whole has suffered a number of setbacks, in the last couple of decades; some of this self-inflicted, in my opinion. And this is because not enough has been put back, especially by those in the industry, in terms of investment in human, financial resources, infrastructure, etc., to properly grow the industry. When I got into it in the mid-eighties, the Nigerian publishing industry was considered the 'most vibrant and dynamic' in the so-called Third World. That's certainly a whole lot more than you can say today. So a whole lot of work needs to be done, and urgently too.



Host, Olatoun Williams