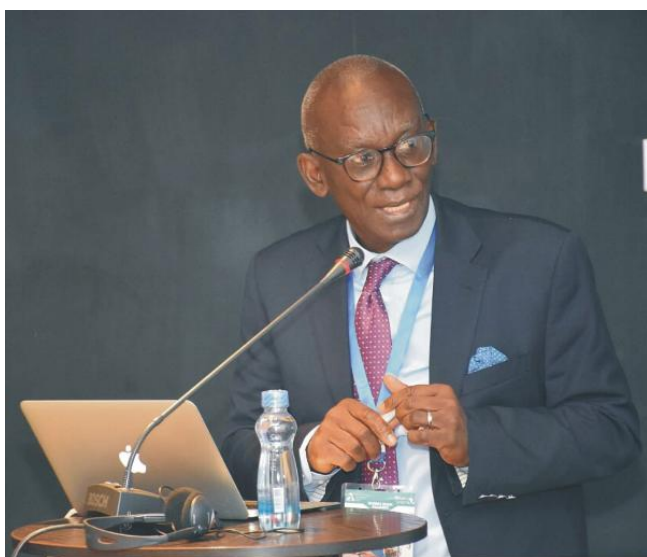


# BORDERS BOOK TRADE INTERVIEWS

Elliot Agyare



**Smart**line

**Elliot Agyare, (Ghana)**

*CEO, Smartline Publishing Limited*

*Immediate Past President, Ghana Book Publishers Association*

*President, Commonwealth Book Publishers Association*

Elliot Agyare took part in the first edition of the IPA African Seminar Series, held in Lagos, Nigeria, May 9<sup>th</sup> 2018. It was our first meeting. I was struck by his clarity, vigour and focus as he spoke on the Socio-Economic panel and when he spoke from the audience. At our second meeting, Agyare sat on a panel about African book fairs which I moderated at Frankfurt Book Fair 2018. Dedicated to the African book industry, the conference was entitled *Changing the Narrative*. Our interaction reinforced my impression of a dedicated professional of the nascent African publishing industry. My third meeting with the urbane Ghanaian publisher was at the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the IPA African Seminar Series. It was held in Nairobi June 14<sup>th</sup> - June 15<sup>th</sup> 2019. I asked him for an interview. It took place in a set-apart seating area of the lobby of the Mövenpick Hotel. The interview with Elliot Agyare was big, rich and stimulating.

# PART 1

**Elliot Agyare, welcome to Borders. Tell us about yourself and your educational background.**

I come from Ghana. Interestingly, I'm an artist. I did my first degree in Art at Art School in Ghana.

**A visual artist?**

Yes. I learned how to paint. After art school I went to the UK for my Masters and enrolled at the University of Salford for a Masters in International Relations. From Art to International Relations!

**A very interesting move.**

When I came from England, in 1993/94. That was the time when Ghana also started the International Studies Unit in the University of Ghana. But unfortunately for me, my Masters was MA while the requirement to become a lecturer was an M. Phil. So I fell back on my art. A side thing I used to be engaged in was helping people design their books, design cassette labels and things like that. I was artistic. I had also come back from England with quite a bit of equipment. It was the time the desktop publishing revolution was just starting to take place. I was helping a lot of publishers. By 1997, I realized that look, I was already doing quite a bit of editing for the publishers. I cross-checked some of the things they did. I was almost a publisher myself. I like the cerebral part of the publishing process. And at that time, Ghana was also going through a transition with regard to the publishing system. The government was divesting from publishing and moving to private publishing model. So I decided why don't I try my hands in publishing? My wife and I co-wrote our first book for our kids and published it. My publishing career really took off from there.

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## PART II – IPA Africa Regional Seminars



IPA/NPA Lagos Seminar, May 9th 2018

(L-R):

**Gbadega Adedapo** (*President, Nigeria Publishers Association, Nigeria*),  
**Elliot Agyare** (*President, Commonwealth Book Publishers Association, Ghana*),  
**John Asein** (*Director-General/CEO, Nigerian Copyright Commission, Nigeria*),  
**Afam Ezekude** (*Former Director-General/CEO, Nigerian Copyright Commission, Nigeria*).



IPA/NPA Lagos Seminar, May 9th 2018

1st Session (L-R):

**Samuel Kolawole** (*Chairman, African Publishers Network, Nigeria*),  
**Asare Yamoah** (*Former President, Ghana Book Publishers Association, Ghana*),  
**Mohammed Radi** (*Vice Chair, African Publishers Network, Egypt*),  
**Sellami Ahmed El Mekki** (*President, Mauritanian Publishers Association, Mauritania*),  
**Elliot Agyare** (*President, Commonwealth Book Publishers Association, Ghana*),



**Frankfurt Book Fair 2018**

**Panel: Asserting & Connecting Identities:  
African Book Fairs and Literary Festivals**

**Olatoun Gabi-Williams** (*Borders Literature for All Nations, Nigeria*),  
**Corinne Fleury** (*Foire du livre de jeunesse de l'île Maurice, Mauritius*),  
**Ruth Kumpmann** (*Frankfurt Book Fair, Germany*),  
**Dr. Madhu Krishnan** (*Writivism, Uganda*),  
**Elliot Agyare** (*President, Commonwealth Book Publishers Association, Ghana*),  
**Dr. Jama Musse Jama** (*Hargeysa Book Fair, Somaliland*),  
**Dr. Ibrahima Moctala Lo** (*Foire Internationale du Livre et  
du Matériel Didactique de Dakar, Senegal*)

**OK, let's move on now to the reason we are here. This seminar. The full title is: *Africa Rising: Realizing Africa's Potential as a Global Publishing Leader of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. It's a resonant title. What does it mean to you?**

For me, when we talk about Africa Rising, it means so many things. First of all, the global publishing industry is worth a hundred billion, every year.

**Publishing is a mighty industry.**

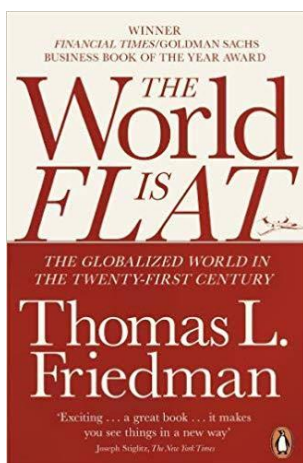
The European publishing industry is worth 22.20 billion. That's 2017 records. Africa is very insignificant part of this picture. We don't even feature. When we talk about Africa Rising, it must have a certain economic significance. What kind of share of that market is Africa going to carve for itself?

## Break it down for us.

What it means is that books that are published in Africa should find space all across the world. Books that are published in Africa should have significance in that they are contributing to the knowledge economy. Because truly, there is knowledge in Africa but the knowledge not being seen and heard.

**Let's just quickly go into those two points you've made. How do we increase the visibility? Give us your ideas.**

OK. You have to realize that there is a convergence of circumstances that is going to aid this Africa Rising thing: one is global logistics. The second is the internet. When I say global logistics, in the past the publishing world was divided into territories. Before, because of logistics, when you are selling and buying rights, you look for North America, Europe, Asia, and sometimes Africa. And because here logistics is such a factor, it was impossible in the past to supply books directly to North America. But now with the global logistics and FedEx, you are able to. As long as people are aware that you have books, the books can crisscross the world because of global logistics.



## Give us an example.

OK. With Smartline Publishing, my own firm, for instance, I print my books in India and the books are stored in a warehouse in Ghana. Let's say someone goes to my website and is interested in the book. How long would it take to ship the book from Ghana by DHL to them? Years ago that would have been a difficult task. But now it is not. In the same way we order books from the US. In maybe five days you have your book. So that has changed. Secondly, because of the internet and my website, people who are interested in Smartline books can just go into the Smartline website and realize that there are books in Smartline because Smartline has published these titles. That is fundamental. Years ago it was almost impossible. There is a book written by the US columnist, Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat*. The concept comes into play because now the world actually is flat.

If we have books that have been published to the highest possible quality and the editorial work has been done well then surely those books must be able to sell on the same shelves as books published by any publisher in any part of the world. That is what I mean by Africa Rising: more books from Africa reaching all parts of the world. This seminar, a forum for publishers and key industry players to get together and talk about this, is most opportune. Rather than being isolated in silos in different countries, it's better for us to travel together so that we sharpen each other and then rise together.

**You put it so well. Earlier you mentioned the knowledge economy. Do you want to talk about that?**

Well, in the past African intellectuals from the universities found it more expedient to publish with international publishers if they really wanted their voice to be heard in the world.

**Yes, the North has always been the world stage for us.**

Yes, that was the stage, but now with the capacity building that is taking place in African publishing, you can publish locally and still be heard out there. African knowledge can originate here but become available worldwide.

**We become like trees planted at home with our branches spread out across the world?**

Exactly. Because once you publish overseas, it goes through the editorial bodies out there. They do whatever they want with it. But if you're published here, the books are given editing that is local. Editing needs to take cognizance of local nuances. There are things we will allow to go because we understand culturally that this is what it is. Rather than it going through the sieving of someone who isn't culturally aware of what we're trying to convey.

**And if we publish at home, we can draw self-esteem from the fact that the production processes are ours. We're in charge.**

Yes. The fact of the matter is that books are cultural tools. Our books speak for us, they project who we are.

**There are only 10 African member countries in the IPA. Is that laziness?**

It's not laziness. It has more to do with whether we find the IPA relevant.

**I think things are beginning to change.**

Yes, exactly. And the IPA itself is beginning to realize that it needs to hear the African voice. But the African voice is not enough in itself, it must also go forth with something.

**Economic backing?**

Economic backing. I mean this conference is almost exclusively supported by the IPA. African Rising means that we support ourselves.

**As we are talking about self-supporting, what is your opinion of book donor organisations? The ones which donate huge amounts of books that are not tailored to African reading needs? How about if they converted some of that into money for publishing education?**

Of course. This is something that we have also spoken about, and I think now there is a little bit more enlightenment from donor organisations, that they do not just take rejects, publisher rejects and unsold books and just come and dump them in Africa. What that does is undermine the publishing market. Books are commodities. In the same way there are dumping laws for other commodities, there should be anti-dumping laws for books as well. Book Aid, for instance, donated a huge amount of books to the Ghana Library Authority, but within that they decided that there was going to be a component ensuring they buy from local publishers. So, with that kind of awareness, it means they are helping the local industry to also develop. <https://bookaid.org/countries/ghana/>

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## **PART III – Government, Literacy & Publishing**

I think Africa and African publishing can develop all the funds needed for Africa. It's a strategic industry. If it's organised properly, it can help in education and cultural enrichment. If I were somebody in power, my greatest challenge would be how to get our people out of illiteracy.

**Yes, you can't create wealth without literacy**

The industry itself has a role to play. How does the industry interface with government, and at which level? Fortunately for us in Ghana, the gap between industry and government and ministries is not that wide. I know in Nigeria, things are different. I suggested to one of the delegates from Nigeria that it probably has to do with the Federal system. From the Nigerian Publishers Association to Abuja is quite a distance

**So the Ghana Book Publishers Association has a closer working relationship with government?**

Yes. It's very easy for us. For instance, two weeks ago I was speaking to the Culture Minister. We were talking about some of these issues and the fact that our industry technically needs to be in Culture.

## Technically?

Yes, technically. The publishing sector is a cultural industry. Our direct link should not be the Ministry of Education, but because we publish books, our link is more with the Ministry of Education than with the Ministry of Culture. We are trying to correct that.

**Very interesting. I was impressed by the number of Kenyan government representatives at the seminar. The highest ranking government representatives were here. That's so important. They are the real decision makers so they needed to be present and very active in this kind of seminar. When we had the Lagos seminar, the only government representatives there were Afam Ezekude and John Asein from the Copyright Commission. I found that so discouraging. We can't really move without government.**



**L-R:**

**Afam Ezekude**, (Nigeria) *Former Director General,  
Nigeria Copyright Commission;*

**John Asein**, (Nigeria), *Incumbent Director General/Chief Executive,  
Nigeria Copyright Commission.*

It shows the priority the government gives the industry. I think that because of the critical nature of the publishing industry and of literacy, this industry should have support in the same way that we prioritise the building of hard infrastructure. And until government and people in position, the policy makers, realize the importance of the publishing industry, it will not attract attention. Because for now, that kind of enlightenment is not there.



The responsibility is up to us, the industry, and organisations like ADEA to reach out to decision makers and development partners. And to sensitise them.

## PART IV – Commonwealth Book Publishers Association



COMMONWEALTH  
BOOK PUBLISHERS  
ASSOCIATION

So let's move on to your role as the President of the Commonwealth Book Publishers Association. Very quickly, tell us about the genesis of the association. Why we need the Commonwealth Publishers Association.

### FLAGS OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS



Well, publishing flourishes when there's a lot of collaboration. So the Commonwealth Book Publishers Association was actually set up to foster relationships between publishers in the different Commonwealth countries. Because, after all, we have a common lineage through colonization by Britain. We meet in London every year during the London Book Fair. Publishing is about markets. Canada, the initiator of the group, found that Commonwealth countries were their closest allies. And there are more Commonwealth countries in Africa than anywhere else in the world. We have common issues we can deal with. This can be about cross-border relationships; we can buy and sell rights from each other. And there can be

mentorship opportunities between well-established publishers and less-established publishers.

**It's good for Africa. Good for Africa to be part of that kind of niche. So you get to work as individual publishers and as groups collaborating. It's very exciting. Are you members of IPA?**

We are in talks with the IPA. We have started our application. Unlike the Ghana Publishers Association, we are having our membership meeting in Frankfurt. We have applied for it. We are supposed to attend the General Meeting in Frankfurt and then the members will vote to accept us or to reject us. (Laughter) We've also forged a relationship a relationship with the Ghana Book Publishers Association.

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## **PART V – Ghana Book Publishers Association**



**I overheard the renowned publishing consultant, Richard Crabbe, praise the improvements the Ghana Book Publishers Association has made. He also praised advances you have made regarding your areas of focus. Tell us a bit about the things you are very proud of and the advances you have made.**

Zimbabwe used to be the bookfair for Africa. It was the go-to bookfair because of all the activities that surrounded its organisation. That was the fair that a lot of publishers went to for training and networking. There needs to be a focal point for African publishing. And irrespective of the fact that we have the Nigerian Book Fair, the Cairo Book Fair, the Moroccan Book Fair, we needed a book fair that Africans congregated at. So it's not that we wanted to benefit from someone else's misfortune, but with the demise of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, we grew stronger.

### **What about the South African Book Fair?**

The South African Book-fare should have replaced ZIBF and when it started, it started with a lot of fanfare. We all attended thinking it was going to be the African book fair like ZIBF but unfortunately it became just a localized SA book fair. When I became president of the Ghana fair, I realized that we had an opportunity to do something in that regard. Let's have a book fair that Africa can attend.

## **Did that involve radical changes?**

Yes. We realized that a bookfair needs certain things in place. Ambience. And it needs a certain look. It needs certain things to have an international flavour and to showcase an industry. It is not just about selling physical books. It is a setting for a meeting of minds of industry players. We talk about the industry and chart a path forward into the future. This is one of the reasons why we moved the fair from the National Theatre to the Conference Centre. It wasn't taken well by a lot of our members.

**The National Theatre gives the fair a more cultural angle. If the publishers resisted, it's probably because they were coming from a more cultural angle.**

Yes, but the National Theatre was also too small. The size of the book fair, the ambience, the space around the book fair, and how the book fair looks, all these things are important. A book fair needs plenty of space. There was the problem of costs though. The new venue, the Conference Centre, was about four times the cost of the Theatre. So it was a very bold move to decide that instead of paying 44,000 Ghana Cedis, we were going to pay 120,000 Ghana Cedis.

## **A leap of faith. Well done!**

Yes. And as soon as we moved it, it changed the way the book-fair held. We didn't stop with the look. The programme of the book-fair is also important. That needed a certain mind change. I had to get my members to understand that: *“We are not going to the book-fair just to go and sell books. When you pay for your stand, you shouldn't be looking to make that same money back. We should be looking for more than that. For other benefits. You want to showcase the fact that we have an industry that has taken its place in the social economic activity in the country”*

## **Tell us about the socio-economic benefits.**

Well, this year our book-fair is focused on encouraging cross-border trade in the book publishing sector and we are inviting other countries to come. We are also surrounding the book fair with a lot of workshops because we want to build the capacity of our members.

## **Wonderful**

We are having a meta-data workshop, for instance. Meta-data is the new buzz word.

## **I wish I knew what meta-data is. What does it mean?**

It means you need to organise your data, your information on the internet in such a way that you are discoverable. You can put all your works on the internet but nobody gets to hear about it.

## **Searchability?**

Exactly! You need to know where to place your ISBN, the kind of buzz words that you need to use, how the book relates to other books

## **Things are very exciting right now. With digital, I mean. There are so many possibilities.**

Our members are now paying more for their stands. We decide on what kind of stands they can have. The stand must be neat. Anytime I come to Nigeria, I'm not happy about how the book fair is organised. I heard through the grapevine that Nigeria wants to move from its usual venue at University of Lagos.

## **Move? But it's the University of Lagos! Isn't that what the attraction is? A research institution?**

Initially. But if you want an international flavour...

## **You need something like a conference setting!**

**I was impressed by the video you showed at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2018. The Ghana International Book Fair looked world class. I felt proud even though I'm not Ghanaian. It showed Africa on the rise.**

Exactly. The thing is that book fairs follow a certain template. If you want a book fair to be a book fair then you must follow that template. The Ghana book fair last year got great reviews. I'm happy Richard Crabbe is saying such nice things about what we're trying to do. But I won't attribute all the success to myself. It's a team that's working. They are working hard.

## **You have said you're trying to institute rights trading more actively at the Ghana Book Fair. Talk to us about that.**

That's what we're doing. One of the things that needs to be understood in African publishing is the need and ability to trade in rights.

**Please explain.**

The Ghana Education Service bought \$45M worth of dictionaries from the developed world when we could have and should have been the ones the government bought from. If the government wants to buy dictionaries, it ought to buy dictionaries that have been localized. You must have local flavour in your dictionary. And every book must have some local flavour. Even Harry Potter was segmented. There was the American Harry Potter and the British Harry Potter. Scholastics have the rights to the American and British editions.

**Why two editions?**

Because of the different Englishes. American English and British English

**There is Ghanaian English and there is Nigerian English**

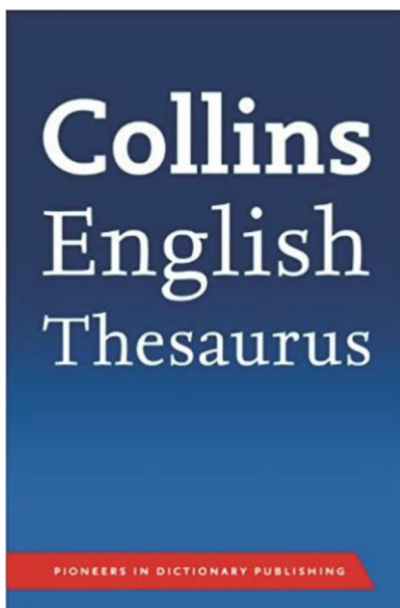
Yes. And that is why we do rights.

**We need to do this dictionary thing.**

And what happens is that once you buy rights, you buy all the capacities embedded in the rights.

**Who would initiate a dictionary project? Who would it be up to if we were to develop a dictionary locally?**

The Ghanaian publishers can. We can do collaborations with international publishers.



**Yes. Do we have any? Have any African countries developed dictionaries? Because the only ones I ever see are Webster's and Collins.**

There aren't any that I know of. But it's not beyond us.

**I think developing local language dictionaries for our own use is a real beginning of Africa's rise. My last question: you are soon to step down as President of Ghana Publishers Association. What are your greatest concerns if any? And what are your hopes as you prepare to leave office?**

My great concern is continuity, because, obviously, we have made or tried to advance the cause of publishing locally, and most reviews are that we are doing well. We are looking for continuity, but in saying that, we are not oblivious to the fact that there could well be leadership

that does not take to what we have put in place. Of course the advancement may even go further than we have, but it's important that definitely we get somebody who will move the agenda forward.

**These are exciting times. I have a lot of faith in the future of African publishing with Ghana leading the way. Before we finish, are you now going to focus exclusively on Smartline and on the Commonwealth Book Publishers Association from now on?**

Yes, that is correct.

**Elliot Agyare, this has been a very interesting conversation. Thank you so much for coming on Borders.**