

BORDERS BOOK TRADE INTERVIEWS

Gbenro Adegbola



Gbenro Adegbola, C.E.O of the publishing firm, First Veritas, was born in 1958 to the founder of the famous Methodist Seminary, Sagamu, Reverend E. A. Adeolu Adegbola, and a school teacher mother. One of four children whose careers span academia and electoral justice at the UN, the family unit he spoke about is a clear exponent of the tradition of accomplishment which makes his achievements far more of an expectation than a surprise. With a degree in Dramatic Arts and African Literature in English from the University of Ife, he ventured into the Oyo State Broadcasting Corporation where he remained a dynamic practitioner until a massive laying-off campaign spearheaded by the successor to Governor Bola Ige, the renowned politician whose daughter Adegbola would go on to marry.

Back in the arena, a sequence of rapid and fortuitous events opened the door for him into publishing and this is the industry he has come to embrace as his true home. Gbenro Adegbola is one of those men who combine high level capacities across a range of fields with a disarming simplicity and friendliness. For a man who describes himself as perennially shy, he is remarkably, if gently, self-assured. He spoke to me about Nigerian publishing, Nigerian publishing history, and the prospects of the Nigerian book industry confronted with the menace of piracy.



Your professional background includes experience as a broadcaster with Oyo State Broadcasting Corporation, but I believe you are best known as a publisher. Tell us about your experience as a broadcaster



*Late Chief Bola Ige (SAN),
former Oyo State Governor
(1979 - 1983)*

It was actually called the Television Service of Oyo State in those days. It had just been founded. I just seemed to have found myself there! As a broadcaster, I was young, energetic and eventually got into political trouble...

Are we allowed to know a little about that?

Yes, in 1983, the Governor of Oyo State who actually became my father-in-law, lost the election. The new governor, believing the station was too partisan, let scores of us go. After the dispersal at the Television Service, I enrolled into a Masters program in Language Arts at the University of Ibadan.

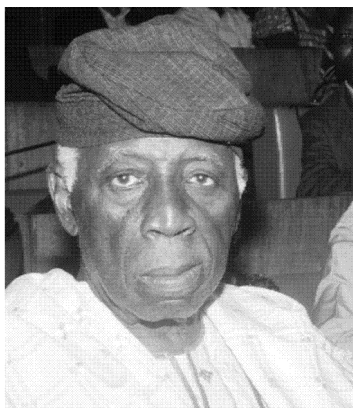
Yes, in 1983, the Governor of Oyo State who actually became my father-in-law, lost the election. The new governor,



Chief Joop Berkhout

When did you get involved in publishing?

The invitation from Spectrum Books came towards the end of my Masters degree. I got the job and was thrown in at the deep end starting first as P.A to the MD. I moved up the ladder very quickly. Spectrum Books was a fantastic learning ground for me.



Dr. Omololu Otunloyo defeated the incumbent Governor of Oyo State, Chief Bola Ige, in the elections of 1983

Your eyes lit up when I mentioned publishing. Do you feel you are far more of a publisher than a broadcaster?

With broadcasting, it was ad hoc learning on the job. With publishing, I received a more thorough training through a combination of courses and working experience. So yes, I think of myself more as a publisher.

Spectrum Books was founded by Dutchman, Chief Joop Berkhout. Would you describe it as an indigenous publishing firm?

The firm was founded by Chief Berkhout (who is no longer involved) and a number of Nigerian investors. Spectrum is as indigenous as they come. The Chief himself has been in Nigeria for upwards of 40 years, since the mid-60s. He is as Nigerian as it can get.

Spectrum started blazing a trail pretty quickly by moving away from exclusively educational publishing (the strongest strand of publishing in Nigeria) to general publishing. In the early 80s, it did extremely well until the economic collapse of the Shagari era which affected the publishing industry very badly. When democracy returned, the stability in the economy and in the polity led to sustained growth in the market which is what the publishing industry is enjoying today.

You are reputed to have done wonderful things with Evans Publishing. Tell us about your stint and how long you were with Evans Publishing for.

I was with Evans for 13 years. It feels like just a few. I came in at the height of its crises and difficulties. The company was indebted to a number of creditors including the UK principals and it was felt that they should try new hands to see if anything fresh could be done. It was a God sent opportunity actually because the small firm I had co-founded, Bookcraft, wasn't growing as fast as the needs of the individual founders: children were growing up, going to secondary school etc. So, I left for Evans. No sooner had I left than Bookcraft started booming!

You are the founder of First Veritas. Tell us about the significance of its name, and how the company empowers the educational community of Nigeria.

My wife and I wanted a name with some gravitas so we settled on Veritas. The idea of number one, gave us 'First'. We empower the educational community of Nigeria

by going beyond the call of publishing duty. We see how we can strengthen teaching through professional development trainings. These were originally intended as a revenue earner but after the first year we realised that the trainings were best done as a responsibility.

Regarding parents, we reach out through our blogs. We believe that schooling/ education, is a tripartite business between schools and teachers; educational leaders; parents and pupils. We try to keep the community we have built, active.

You are considered one of the leading players in the digital publishing industry in Nigeria. Would you say that digital publishing has made any significant impact in Nigeria thus far?

The impact has been minimal relative to how dominant print remains. There are a number of difficulties:

- *The non-democratisation of internet access. Internet access is not as accessible as it should be and it is pretty expensive.*
- *The high cost of digital devices.*
- *The hostility of people who are not part of the digital generation to things digital. The hostile generation (and not youth who embrace the digital world) unfortunately is the decision making generation.*

Related to that question, what are your distribution strategies for digital books, as opposed to distribution and marketing strategies for conventional print products?

We describe ourselves both as digital and print publishers but our digital stuff continues to take a back seat in relation to print. The bulk of our digital products gets distributed as a tie-in with print. I'm talking low-tech now e.g CDs attached to books. We have several on-line resources which we haven't pushed too hard.

The mobile phone market is booming. How can publishers exploit this booming market for offering creative content on mobiles or for purposes of digital learning?

OKADABOOKS
taking your imagination places

Okada Books is doing commendable things in the creative space with mobile phone technology. But I still think there is resistance in terms of the limitations of digital in relation to print. There is that feel that print gives you that you don't get from digital, that tactile feel. So mobile phones and other digital platforms haven't attained anywhere near their potential.

What about the costs of developing digital content by publishers who are keen to migrate to this new publishing environment?

Relative to print, the costs are significantly cheaper. You are producing according to demand. In that sense, digital is more accessible. And technology is improving every day. It is almost a do-it-yourself thing. You don't need any specialist to convert your books to digital. There are templates you just fit the content into. It's pretty straightforward.

Do you see any drawbacks with this proliferation of digital resources so that people can self-publish?

It's good for the industry; it's good for the trade. The only drawback is that absence of an intermediation agency. Editing, refining, re-writing. That will be absent in that model and that would be a drawback.

I learned from an interview you gave about your misgivings about the low bar set for entry into the publishing industry. Were you referring to publishing professionalism and publishing education?



**University of Ibadan, (UI)
Ibadan, Oyo State**

Professionalism, education... There are only a few institutions that offer publishing courses where you can get certification in publishing. I think Yaba College of Technology offers a Publishing Diploma and the University of Ibadan offers a Masters in Publishing Studies or something like that. There are probably a number of others but those are the two that I know.

You find that people who end up in publishing simply find their way there and more than anything else, learn on the job. The deficit in publishing professionalism was aggravated in the 80s and 90s by the instability of the military era and everything else negative associated with those times. The 80s and 90s pushed the publishing industry into the doldrums; it was a terrible time for the industry.

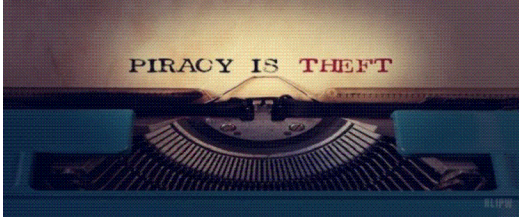
In the last decade or so, many companies have grown stronger. I've noticed many more investing in publishing training.

Still with digital, share your views on the menace of piracy/theft. Is it likely to come to an end when more content is published in digital form rather than print books?

Initially digital looked like a way out but even then whichever hacker is sufficiently determined, will get through whatever protection is in place. After all, protection is a creation. All that is needed is for someone to reverse-work it. To that extent there is no hiding place really. Print is so easy though there are techniques to making it more difficult to be copied, pirated. But these techniques tend to work more for

proving in court that the product is not genuine. It doesn't prevent the pirates from copying initially so it's a huge problem in the creative industry generally. Entertainment. Music. Education. A huge problem.

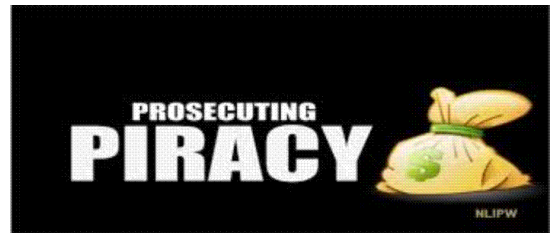
Finally, please shed light on the problems and logistical challenges undermining the Nigerian/African book industry. What are 3 key challenges that you have identified in your own experience as a publisher, and what do you propose as the way forward?



Taking off from our last question, piracy: *If nothing is done, it's going to kill the industry in the sense that there will be no incentive for further creations; no incentive for investments in creative works. And I have always felt that*

this danger to society should be converted into public enlightenment. I think most people will key into that and see that this is something that needs to be fought. Going back to my experience with the Nigerian Publishers Association which I led for a couple of years, every training workshop we held for schools, had a 15 minute segment on enlightenment and piracy. Even little things like that will be very helpful.

The second challenge would be the dearth of training opportunities/professional development courses: *The industry can't go into universities and tell them to set up publishing courses. What is needed is for the self-help courses organised by the industry to be strengthened and expanded initially. And individual companies should invest more in training, possibly overseas training as well. The traditional excuse is that if you train someone, there is no guarantee they will stay. My position is that the experience will not leave the industry. It remains in it even if they don't stay with your company. So people have to take an industry-wide attitude.*



I was encouraged to see that Kwara State University which is a very new university, is starting up some sort of program where they host publishing scholars and send them from here to the West. A powerful intervention, I would have thought. Is that the sort of thing you are thinking of?

I am certainly sure that that is due to the influence of the late Abiola Irele who was the Provost.



Host, Olatoun Gabi-Williams