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# Africa e Mediterraneo

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chaîne du livre en Afrique grâce  
à la coopération nationale  
et internationale

Il mercato del libro in Egitto,  
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From Colonialism to the Future  
of Global Publishing:  
The Growing Influence of  
African and Arab Publishing





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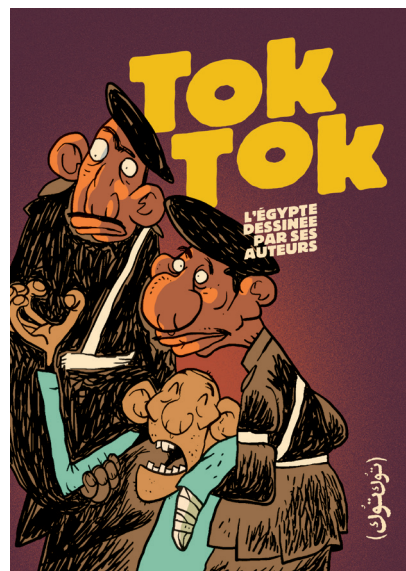
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# From Colonialism to the Future of Global Publishing: The Growing Influence of African and Arab Publishing

The African and Arab publishing markets have followed similar trajectories in which colonization and then subsequent independence significantly shaped publishing market development. But some recent initiatives are enhancing their international visibility.

By Bodour Al Qasimi

**B**ased on imperfect statistics, the Arab World exports \$223 million of printed books annually, while Africa exports \$173 million (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). Collectively, these 66 countries, with a literate population in excess of 550 million (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2019), have a book market estimated to be worth more than \$2 billion (Sharjah Update 2016; Williams 2018a). While this is a drop in the bucket in comparison to traditional publishing hubs, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France, there are signs that the significance of Arab and African publishing markets is growing in significance through a process of cultural hybridization. In a similar way as described by Tomlinson (1999) and Appadurai (1990), unidirectional cultural flows to these regions are increasingly being supplanted by multidirectional flows that support indigenous publishing and the creative industries reaching the world stage. Several studies have found that cultural globalization, a process of international consumption of culture through the internet, media, and travel, has led to the diffusion of books, movies, and other cultural goods from a more diverse array of countries historically outside the cultural mainstream (Janssen 2009; Janssen, Kuipers, Verboord 2008). In the global publishing industry, this has meant that the rather insular, consolidated global publishing market dominated historically by a select few publishers in traditional publishing hubs, is opening up to publishers and cultural creators in more diverse locations like China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Once on the sidelines of cultural globalization, countries like these are emerging as publishing hubs and nodes in the increasingly globalized cultural industries. And the world is starting to take notice. One telling example of how globalized the publishing industry has become was the 2013 decision by the Man Booker Prize to open the most important literary

award in the English-speaking world to all English-language writers. This was followed by a 2015 decision to award the Man Booker International Prize for fiction in translation. Though gains have been made, there still remains an uneven global flow of books and cultural goods to the Arab World and Africa that crowds out indigenous publishing. This article will discuss the similar challenges the publishing industries in the Arab World and Africa face in finding a global voice as well as initiatives enabling these regions to play a more prominent role in cultural globalization. While analyzing the particularities of such a vast region is complex, and some conclusions may not apply equally to all countries, there are common threads which appear broadly generalizable.

## **The Consequences of Cultural Imperialism on Indigenous Publishing: The Case of the United Arab Emirates**

Several countries in the Arab World and Africa share a similar trajectory whereby the written word existed in early civilizations but printed books only became widespread after colonization ended. As Jay and Bgoya (2016) find, independence and increasing literacy levels in Africa ushered in a new era of cultural domination with the entry of foreign-owned educational publishing taking root - a finding that mirrors developments in the Arab World. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) observes, cultural imperialism, in particular, has been very damaging to indigenous publishing.

The UAE's struggle to build a publishing industry upon gaining independence mirrors Africa's post-colonial experience. In 1971, when the UAE achieved its independence, only 48% of the adult population was literate, with literacy amongst women at only 38% (Crown Prince Court Emirate of Abu Dhabi, 2011; Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Washington DC, 2019). At this time, the UAE produced under 30 books, similar to the production of many African countries at the time (United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1982).



From left to right:  
Bodour Al Qasimi between Bibi Bakare-Yusuf and Lola Shoneyin. ©IPA

International Publishers Association Seminar, "Publishing for Sustainable Development, the Role of Publishers in Africa", held in Lagos, May 9th 2018 ©IPA

In the 1980s, the UAE introduced the country's first Press and Publications Law, established the nation's first professional association for writers, and in 1982 the first Sharjah International Book Fair, now one of the world's largest book fairs, was held. With literacy levels increasing rapidly, many of the stories in the UAE that had historically been passed down from generation to generation orally began to be documented in books. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the UAE modernized its copyright and intellectual property protection frameworks with entry into the World Trade Organization. Beginning in the late-2000s, a number of initiatives sprung up to support the development of the national publishing industry and address reading challenges. Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah, the UAE's largest emirates, launched a variety of industry support initiatives, and a national publishing association, the Emirates Publishing Association, was established in 2009. In 2016, the UAE's National Reading Law was passed backed by \$30 million in funding for publishing industry support and reading initiatives.

Today, nearly 50 years after independence, the UAE's publishing market is estimated to be worth over \$200 million, exports approximately \$40 million, and publishes approximately 500 books annually (Gulf News, 2016). The UAE has transitioned from a small country with almost no domestic publishing industry to become an emergent global publishing hub with a growing national culture of reading. However, the consequences of cultural imperialism are still visible in the over 50% contribution of imported textbooks to publishing imports annually (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). There is also a lack of diversity of high quality Arabic books and digital content to meet surging demand from the country's youthful, technology-embracing population (Emirates Publishers Association, 2018). The case of the UAE appears consistent with studies that find African



publishing markets are also dominated by educational publishing with indigenous publishing crowded out by imports (Christensen *et al.*, 2002; Jay, Bgoya 2016). However, as Williams (2018b) observes, confirmed in more empirically based studies such as Shao and Yang (2014) and Haouas and Heshmati (2014), resource wealth has led to human capital investment in the UAE that has positively impacted growth, while many African economies are trapped in the "resources curse" or lack the national wealth to achieve high levels of literacy.

### The Digital Opportunity:

#### Preventing a New Age of Digital Imperialism

Digitization and connectivity are key drivers of cultural globalization in the Arab World and Africa which are leading to rapid integration into global publishing markets. With an internet growth rate of 10,199% in Africa and 4,894% in the Arab World from 2000 to 2018, the highest internet user growth rates in the world, digital connectivity is a key factor (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2019). Technology allows new possibilities for publishing industries in developing markets. Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, first published in 2013 in Arabic, would never have reached the shortlist for the Man Booker International Prize without his digital collaboration with translator Jonathan Wright that enabled him to break into the Western literary world. Similarly, the digital reach of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, which also found its way into a hit song by the American singer Beyoncé and was used on the runway by the French luxury goods company Christian Dior, was critical to her rise as a cross-cultural literary phenomenon.

Africa and the Arab World share a common struggle in how to benefit from their youth bulges, which can either be a boon to indigenous publishing industries or further assert the dominance of imported books and global content platforms. With 60% of Africa's population and 46% of the Arab World's population under 24, both regions have young, increasingly digitally connected populations (McKee, Keulertz, Habibi, Mulligan, Woertz 2017; United Nations Population Division, 2019). Whether this spells promise or peril depends on the development of indigenous publishing industries and increasingly publishing tech upstarts, like Kotobi in Egypt and Okadabooks in Nigeria, that bypass longstanding distribution challenges in

the Arab World and Africa to reach readers on mobile devices. On average, mobile phone ownership in a panel of 17 sub-Saharan African countries is 40% for 15-18 year olds, 63% for 19 to 29, and 60% for individuals between 30 and 45 (Tortora, Rheault 2011). A recent study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (2014) including Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe found that, on average, young women spend 207 minutes and men spend 33 minutes per month reading on their mobile phones. Taken together, these studies suggest high levels of mobile phone usage by youth are increasingly leading to more reading on mobile devices. In the Arab World, similar emerging evidence suggests mobile phones are displacing printed books while at the same time increasing reading levels (United Nations Development Program, 2016). The educational publishing sector is an initial starting point for building indigenous publishing industries in both the Arab World and Africa. However, digital transformation in the publishing industry, accelerated by the rapid growth of digital economies, will likely mean that the smartphone is potentially an even more effective route to reaching readers (United Nations Children's Fund, 2017). There have long been calls to indigenize the offline publishing industry which potentially ignore how important regional digitization is disrupting traditional publishing. Similar to the current situation in which lack of sufficient books of high quality precipitate imports, a real risk is that Arab and African publishers and writers are subjected to a new era of colonialism through digital imperialism if they ignore digitization trends in the publishing industry. In addition to developing indigenous publishing industries focused on printed books and textbooks, the new challenge is indigenous, locally relevant digital content.

### Emerging Initiatives to Promote the Growing Influence of African and Arab Publishing

A number of initiatives are currently underway to promote the growing influence of African and Arab publishing. In Africa, several prominent conferences have been held to address building indigenous publishing industries. For example, in May 2018, on the sidelines of the Nigeria International Book Fair, the Nigerian Publishers Association, in partnership with the International Publishers Association, hosted a one-day seminar under the theme of "Publishing for Sustainable Development: The Role of Publishers". Approximately 200 people from over 20 countries attended the event, making it one of the largest publishing events ever hosted in Africa. In November 2017, the World Intellectual Property Organization hosted a high level regional conference, and, in January 2018, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa and the Global Book Alliance hosted a regional workshop. All of these initiatives resulted in collective action plans. A key challenge remains moving towards implementation and promoting coordination between the stakeholders behind these initiatives. The Arab World has taken a different approach to building its publishing and creative industries and promoting stakehold-

er cooperation. Across the Arab World, free zones are increasingly being used to integrate authors, translators, publishers, distributors, and retailers into well-functioning cultural clusters. A notable example is Sharjah Publishing City which is focused on transforming the Arab publishing industry to make it globally competitive and bringing the voice of Arab writers, publishers, and content creators to the world.

### Conclusion

The potential for the publishing industries in the Arab World and Africa for contributing to development is significant. Cultural globalization presents a unique opportunity for these regions to build indigenous publishing industries that can serve increasing global demand for more diverse narratives as well as enhance bibliodiversity to promote readership at home. The youthful, technology-embracing populations of these regions will likely lead to a substantial shift towards reading on mobile devices. This means that not only should the focus be on indigenizing educational publishing and bibliodiversity, but industry indigenization efforts should also be more broadly focused on digital content. There are a number of promising initiatives underway in both regions to support the publishing industry, but the challenge will be moving from plans to action.

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## Bodour Al Qasimi

is Founder and CEO of Kalimat Group, the first publishing house in the United Arab Emirates dedicated to publishing high quality children's books and educational content. As Founder and President of the Emirates Publishers Association, she plays a key role in supporting national efforts to transform the publishing and digital content industries to contribute to innovation and cultural exchange. Bodour has been pivotal in driving many global initiatives in the effort to develop the publishing industry worldwide. She has recently been elected Vice President of the International Publishers Associations (IPA). She leads a number of national and international initiatives to promote youth and gender empowerment, economic development, and cross-cultural exchange.

## Dal colonialismo al futuro dell'editoria globale: la crescente influenza dell'editoria africana e araba

In base a recenti statistiche, ancora incomplete, delle Nazioni Unite, il mondo arabo esporterebbe 223 milioni di dollari all'anno di libri stampati, mentre l'Africa esporterebbe 173 milioni. Molti Paesi nel mondo arabo e africano condividono lo stesso percorso: la cultura scritta esiste da tempo ma la diffusione dei libri e lo sviluppo dell'editoria hanno avuto inizio solo con la fine dell'era coloniale. Per questo, le industrie editoriali locali si trovano oggi ad affrontare simili sfide, sostenute da alcune iniziative che consentono a queste regioni di svolgere un ruolo sempre più importante nella globalizzazione culturale. Esempio è l'esperienza degli Emirati Arabi Uniti nella costruzione di un'industria editoriale autoctona. Nel 1971, anno dell'indipendenza, solo il 48% della popolazione adulta era alfabetizzata. Con il rapido aumento dei livelli di alfabetizzazione, molte delle storie tramandate oralmente di generazione in generazione hanno cominciato a essere scritte nei libri. Nel 1982 si è tenuta la prima Sharjah International Book Fair, oggi una delle più importanti fiere del libro al mondo.

Negli anni '90 e nei primi anni 2000, gli Emirati Arabi Uniti hanno modernizzato le norme sulla protezione del diritto d'autore e sulla proprietà intellettuale: sono quindi sorte numerose iniziative per sostenere lo sviluppo dell'industria editoriale nazionale e affrontare le sfide della lettura. Oggi, 50 anni dopo l'Indipendenza, il mercato editoriale degli Emirati Arabi Uniti ha un valore stimato di più di 200 milioni di dollari, e il Paese è considerato un polo editoriale emergente a livello mondiale. Le conseguenze dell'imperialismo culturale sono però ancora visibili, ad esempio nel fatto che più del 50% delle importazioni di libri riguarda i libri di testo. Invece, il settore dell'editoria scolastica costituisce un punto di partenza fondamentale per la costruzione di industrie editoriali locali sia nel mondo arabo sia in Africa. Anche la digitalizzazione e la connettività sono fattori chiave, in quanto la tecnologia apre nuove possibilità per le industrie editoriali nei mercati in via di sviluppo, ma se gli editori e scrittori arabi e africani ignorano la tendenza alla digitalizzazione nell'industria editoriale, c'è il rischio concreto che siano sottoposti a una nuova era di colonialismo, una sorta di "imperialismo digitale".

L'Africa e il mondo arabo condividono una simile sfida anche rispetto al pubblico dei giovani. Piattaforme innovative come *Kotobi* in Egitto e *Okadabooks* in Nigeria superano le difficoltà della distribuzione raggiungendo i lettori su dispositivi mobili, il cui uso è in rapida crescita. Vari incontri e conferenze si sono svolti negli ultimi anni per promuovere la crescente influenza dell'editoria africana e araba nel mondo, supportando la costruzione di industrie editoriali autoctone, tramite la messa a punto di piani d'azione collettivi.



Le roi Ibrahim Njoya.  
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