AFRICAN STREET LITERATURE AND THE FUTURE OF LITERARY FORM

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Introduction

This text is about an ongoing research project on contemporary African literature that circulates outside the infrastructures of the global book market. The researchers involved in the project are based at Uppsala University, Sweden, and collaborate closely with librarians at the Nordic Africa Institute where a small collection of ephemeral, often self-published texts is being established.1 This collection is a part of the book collection at the Nordic Africa Institute’s library, but can be accessed as a sub-collection in the library catalogue. The article is co-authored by one of the researchers and two of the librarians and is organised into two main sections: one is written from the perspective of the researchers who collect and study the material. This section outlines the project, its scope, general research questions and how texts have been collected. The second part is written from the perspective of the librarians, presents some of the possibilities and challenges involved in cataloguing the material and the ways in which it differs from the rest of the library collection.

The African Street Literature Project: scope, research questions and method

The project African Street Literature and the Future of Literary Form is a four-year project that involves two researchers – Dr. Ashleigh Harris and Dr. Nicklas Hållén – and is funded by the Swedish Research Council. It studies the transformation, hybridisation and emergence of literary forms in contexts outside the established global infrastructures of literature, which lift works of literature out of the place where they are produced. What kind of texts will you get, for example, when more and more writers self-publish their works, either on the internet or by paying out of their own pockets to print a relatively small number of books that are then sold to bookshops, friends and fellow members of the author’s church? What forms does poetry take when it is read aloud on a walkway in downtown Nairobi and the poet knows that people might film the reading and share it over the internet? What happens to short fiction when authors write and readers read it on smartphones?

Scholars working on African literature who are based at Western universities more often than not focus on texts that are close at hand, in their University Library and in bookshops. One might assume that a reason for this is the idea that literary works that “matter”, because they are widely read and discussed, will stay in print and be accessible globally. However, it is easy to see how this line of reasoning leads one into circular thinking: literary works that “matter”
are accessible to the Western scholar and matter because they are accessible. In other words, the fact that certain kinds of works of literature sell well, are widely discussed in academic journals and at conferences and reviewed in respected papers and magazines creates a blind spot, since other kinds of works do not get the same global exposure – kinds of literature that typically are more difficult to package and sell as commodities on the global market.

Much has been said in recent years about the fact that African writing that receives global attention and wins writers prestigious literary prizes has tended to convey its “Africanness” not so much by being of, from and about the level of the everyday in African spaces, but as “ornamental detail”, as Eileen Julien puts it (Julien, 2006, p. 672). Such “extroverted” works address a reader who does not need to be a cultural insider but nonetheless hold up their Africanness as a way to confer value to themselves. They present themselves to the potential buyer and reader as African books (typically novels), being about Africans and set in African milieus but they are perfectly readable and intelligible for readers with no or little experience of negotiating the flows and disruptions of life in African cities (or rural areas, for that matter). Other commentators have pointed out that another form of African writing that seems to be addressed to non-African readers is texts that focus on themes like abject poverty, terrorism, child-soldiers and different forms of suffering that global readers may associate with the continent to a degree that is not necessarily justified in the light of political and economic developments in recent years. In a review of NoViolet Bulawayo’s We Need New Names in The Guardian, Nigerian author Helon Habila refers to this as a kind of literary “poverty-porn” (Habila, 2013). This might be understood as another kind of extroversion in so far as it feeds into non-African conceptions of what everyday life in Africa is like rather than a literature that grows out of this life. Put differently, what justifies Habila’s critique is the fact that the focus on poverty and suffering is one that many African readers do not necessarily recognise but that non-African readers perceive as an authentic representation of Africa.

The project was conceived as an attempt to counteract the focus on extroverted novels in scholarly debate about African writing by studying material that circulates in urban spaces and that is written for those who inhabit them, rather than for a market whose centre is elsewhere. In the context of this project, the term “street literature” is used to refer to writing that emerges from and registers the ebbs and flows of everyday life in spaces where “ordinary” people from different communities and walks of life interact and where the local, the regional and the global intersect in complex ways. The members of the research project are interested in the ways in which this material differs from the texts, typically novels, that receive so much attention from the global community of academics and critics, not just in terms of themes and content but also in terms of literary form, style and modes of publishing. Naturally,
this entails collecting a number of texts to study, a corpus that has continued
to grow slowly but steadily.

It has been a deliberate choice to attempt to locate and collect texts in sev-
eral ways and from several sources, rather than develop a method to hold
to strictly, since it is a goal to accumulate a wide and diverse selection of
works. The researchers have therefore collected digital texts online and phys-
ical books, pamphlets etc., as it were, in situ in African cities – Johannesburg,
Nairobi, Harare (and, in the near future, Lagos, Accra and Cape Town). On a
few occasions they have ordered or requested material from publishers and
authors. When travelling in the aforementioned cities, the researchers have
talked to publishers, bookshop owners, academics, critics and writers who
have sold or donated texts for the collection or referred them to other people
or shops where material has been acquired. When possible, the researchers
have interviewed the people whose works they have collected for the library
or who have published them, sometimes with the intent to post parts of the
interviews on the project’s blog.²

Because the focus in the project is on emerging forms of literature, the material
varies greatly in terms of genre, material form and mode of publication. There-
fore the collection includes the catalogues of literary magazines like Botsotso
and Kotaz that were published in conventional ways, but that contain poetry
by writers whose works are interesting from the point of view of the project
and for its stakeholders. However, the collection also contains self-published
pamphlets, books and comics and will contain digital documents and links to
such digital material as YouTube clips of oral poetry performances, texts pub-
lished on blogs and authors’ homepages.

Copyright and the ethics of collecting

Some of the issues that cause problems in the collection phase in a project like
that described above have repercussions in the analysis phase too. One exam-
ple of such a problem will have to suffice here, to illustrate how methods of
collecting are intimately intertwined with methods of reading. Because of the
nature of the project and the kind of material it focuses on, a number of prob-
lems arise in the collection phase. Literary scholars do not necessarily receive
much training when it comes to the juridical and ethical side of handling the
material they study, precisely because the method of finding the works to
study is typically no more complicated than walking down to the university
library. It is more problematic, however, to work with books that have been
purchased from a man who has spread out a couple of dozen volumes on the
pavement on Moi Avenue in Nairobi and who is unable or unwilling to tell
you where he got them from. Pirated material is prevalent among the books
that circulate on the streets of Nairobi, Lagos and many other African cities,
and this material is more or less indistinguishable from the real commodity

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(according to some people the researchers have talked to, it is not uncommon that they come from the very same printer as the original). For this reason, the project members have tried to buy materials directly from the authors themselves when it has been possible and when it has not been possible, they have bought them from reliable booksellers who have been able to account for how they get the texts they sell.

However, it comes with the territory that one cannot be certain in all cases that what one buys is the “real deal”, as it were. Sometimes material is found “on the street” – that is, outside of the aforementioned contexts where it is more likely that the material has not been pirated – that is too interesting to be passed up. This material will eventually have to be closely studied before it goes into the library collection and is catalogued. One could guess that the work with tracking down the authors and finding out where the texts come from may provide some insight into how the literary market works in certain African spaces.

While copyright and the ethics of collecting are a problem in the collecting phase of the project, similar questions arise when one sits down to analyse and describe the material from the point of view of a literary scholar. If potential pirating is a problem when one tracks down, collects and catalogues works of literature, the corresponding problem that arises when one reads and studies the immaterial “text” is plagiarism. Authors whose works do not go through the normal channels of gatekeeping and editing that we associate with formal publishing may have a different view of what is fair when it comes to borrowing and re-using material that someone else has created. For example, long quotations and paraphrased sections of text, sometimes without clear references to the source, is a common component in West African pamphlet literature (Newell, 2008, p. 17). This phenomenon has been traced to techniques of transmission of text in oral literary culture and arguably seen as fair use of texts and words of wisdom that – in a specific and not always juridical sense - exists in “the public domain” of the street (Newell, 2008, p. 17). Whereas some such cases of borrowing and quoting would undoubtedly be classified as copyright infringements in a court of law, it would be a mistake to see it from a scholarly point of view as an infringement or plagiarism, insofar as these terms imply a measure of dishonest intent.

The Nordic Africa Institute

The Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) is a centre for research, documentation and information on contemporary Africa in the Nordic region, based in Uppsala, Sweden. The institute promotes, supports and encourages academic and policy relevant research. It also strives to strengthen the cooperation between African and Nordic researchers. The research that is conducted at the Institute is mainly in the social sciences – for example political science or international
relations – but from time to time the Institute also carries out research projects that are focused on the humanities. For example, researchers at the institute have been responsible for the project “Cultural images in and of Africa”, a project that studied Western and Nordic images of Africa. Right now researcher Erik Falk is working on a project about the circulation of literature in East Africa, which is a part of the larger project “World literature: cosmopolitan and vernacular dynamics”.

Fiction in the Nordic Africa Institute library

The library has been an important part of the Institute since the start in 1962. Even though the main focus of the library collection is on social sciences, the library has always acquired fiction. One of the reasons is that fiction is an important cultural expression of a society and that it can give perspectives and insights that in different ways can contribute to social science research. A recent example of this is the 2018 Claude Ake Visiting Chair Heidi Hudson – professor of international relations and director of the Centre of African Studies at the University of Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa – using Amos Tutuola’s folktales for new perspectives on gender identity (Sävström, 2018). The overarching aim with the library collection is to cover the whole African continent. This applies also to the fiction collection, which consists of novels, plays, poetry and short stories by authors from almost all African countries. To some extent fiction written by diaspora authors who have their roots in Africa is acquired as well. The library now has more than 4,000 fiction titles.

Acquisition decisions are usually based on reviews in the daily press or academic journals, prize nominations, or titles that have had an impact on important social questions. To complement the fiction collection, works of literary criticism are acquired as well. The library acquires, by preference, works of fiction written in European languages (French, Portuguese or English). In most cases, a Swedish book vendor is used for this (because there is a framework agreement in place), with no direct orders from, for example, African book vendors. This means that the fiction collection to a large degree is sourced from already established publishers and established authors.

The African Street Literature material

As mentioned above, the titles that this project adds to the collection are to a large extent not published in conventional ways. Therefore it would have been difficult for the library to acquire them through the usual book vendors. Fiction published only on different electronic resources is something that historically has not been included in the catalogue, so this is a new experience for the library. The collected material can be of great value for the library’s users, however, since it includes works that in some cases reach a very large group of readers, and it is also read by a different kind of reading audience compared to
the books usually acquired. One good example of this is the novels by the best-selling South African author of the Hlomu series, Dudu Busani-Dube. These are self-published titles that have sold tens of thousands of copies in South Africa.

For the Nordic Africa Institute the project is interesting not just from a literary perspective, but also from a sociological perspective. Literary forms like street performances and spoken word poetry can give new insights into the urban development and reading culture in African megacities. The project also gives examples of what the book market and publishing industry looks like in Africa. The material can be of interest for researchers focused on urban development and rapid urbanisation in Africa. The African Street Literature titles definitely fill a gap in the collection.

The initial phase

The parties involved realised early on that the Nordic Africa Institute library was a natural partner in this project. Together with the research application for the research programme, the library sent a letter of intent to build up a collection within the project. In the letter four things were stressed:

1. That the project would enable the library to get hold of literature that it would not have been able to acquire otherwise,
2. That the bibliographical work at the library would boost the visibility of literature from the South both for the authors and readers and for other researchers interested in the topic,
3. That the project would enable the library to develop strategies for integration of new literary forms in a library catalogue and
4. That the library would disseminate its experiences from the project within its professional networks.

Early on the library also became involved regarding copyright issues. It needs to have the necessary permissions from the rights holders to store and disseminate their full text materials through the library systems. These questions are ideally sorted out as close to the source as possible. Agreement forms were designed for the researchers to bring along on their travels – to be filled out with archival grade pens and returned to the library together with the materials in question. Three different versions were designed:

1. For regularly published works, and
2. For self-published works – giving the library the right to digitise and to disseminate them.
3. For filmed performances of literary works, giving the library the right to disseminate the video through streaming or physical media.
Collaborative workflow

The researchers chose an online project management service to handle tasks internally as well as keeping track of, and describing online resources selected within the project: blogs, journals, artist homepages and more – collections of works as well as individual items. A Nordic Africa Institute librarian could then create a personal account and become invited to the project area, with limited rights. From there, lists of the selected resources can be easily exported as files with comma separated values (titles, URLs, descriptions and more), subsequently easy to edit and sort within a spreadsheet application. So far, the librarians have used these lists for regular, manual cataloguing. This kind of structured data could certainly be used as a basis for more batch-wise imports to the integrated library system (ILS) but so far, at least, the benefits would probably not outweigh the extra data processing needed. Also, it could be argued that the ideal structure and punctuation ultimately required by the MARC21 format in the ILS could be an obstacle. The researchers should not need to consider those details in their own working process. Batch imports may however be one route for the library to explore, should the number of incoming titles increase dramatically.

Cataloguing print and electronic materials

At the time of writing the Nordic Africa Institute library uses Aleph as its ILS and Primo as the discovery layer (both products from, and hosted by Ex Libris – a ProQuest Company\(^3\)) with end users utilising the latter to search and explore the library’s collections.\(^4\) As materials from the project are catalogued records become available – findable – for end users shortly after. The cataloguing includes adding a specific phrase in a note field which keeps the project material together, making them identifiable, searchable and linkable as a sub-collection. Through the years the NAI library has put a lot of effort in to keyword indexing its collections using authorised terms, based on the OECD/UN Macrothesaurus for Information Processing in the Field of Economic and Social Development (OECD/UN). The African Street Literature materials are no exception in this regard. Whenever possible, records will be enriched with relevant keywords, and not only with expected ones like fiction, novels, short stories etc. As a social sciences library first and foremost, other keywords are much more frequent. Next to the abovementioned keywords there are already project records indexed with, for instance climate change, crime, empowerment, farming, foreign investment, girls, human trafficking, mythology, women’s status and youth. This way, tapping in to the library’s established keywords, the African Street Literature materials become visible in new contexts, intermingled in results lists with quite different types of titles. At the same time the project’s titles may provide useful new perspectives within all these various subjects. Some would perhaps object that this risks bringing “noise” to a mainly scholarly catalogue. This is a relevant objection, but with increasingly better functionality in the search interfaces to manage sorting, include and exclude options and so on,
one could also argue that it should not be any serious problem to tweak search and results the way you want.

Online resources such as websites and blogs are fundamentally no different to catalogue from traditional print material, but they come with their own peculiarities and challenges. Finding the publisher or date information is not always a straightforward thing, and oftentimes additional notes or summaries are needed to better describe the titles. Regular link checking will certainly be needed as with any other online resources. Other formats are expected also. While the library currently has no system for long-term preservation of electronic documents in a strict sense, it has previously established workflows within the current ILS to manage pdfs and such documents, and it also may consider the ISO-standardised PDF/A format where possible, as a method of improving preservation. The researchers have also identified mobile phone applications dedicated for publishing and reading as relevant within the scope of the project. How – or if – these non-traditional manifestations of works can be documented, collected and made available as they are remains to be answered. Alternative ways to document them are likely needed.

Dissemination

The Nordic Africa Institute library often makes it clear that its catalogue is no dead end for (meta)data. The library plays, through its position in an established and growing infrastructure, an important role in dissemination. This was also a factor taken into consideration in the early phases of the project. The prospect of becoming more visible for a wider audience may even motivate creators to share their work with the project. The catalogue metadata is possible to harvest via OAI-PMH, it is searchable through the Z39.50 protocol, and MARC records are regularly exported. The following is a brief overview describing the infrastructural landscape.

Usually cataloguing begins in Libris, Sweden’s national union catalogue, from which records are imported daily to the local catalogue. From an end user point of view Libris of course has a global reach through its web interface, and the reach in general will likely improve with their shift to linked data (Kungl. Biblioteket, 2018). Libris also has a Nordic reach more specifically via its interlibrary loans functionality. Still, the library has, because of its Nordic mission, found it important to strive for making records visible in relevant national catalogues within the other Nordic countries as well. Since quite a few years back MARC records are exported quarterly to Denmark’s Bibliotek. dk making the library collections an integral part – visible and readily loanable – in the Danish context. Iceland chose a different path in early 2018, harvesting only the open access online resources in the Nordic Africa Institute library catalogue, effectively making them a sub-collection within their Leitir. is catalogue. When it comes to Norway, the Nordic Africa Institute library was
included in the Biblioteksøk³ catalogue but this stopped in 2017, due to technical reasons. The aim is however to be a part of it again in the future. The library collections have never been visible from within Finnish catalogues, but during 2018 important steps were taken investigating the possibilities of joining Finna. fi, a “one stop destination for searching” the collections of Finnish archives, libraries and museums⁴. Finally it can be added that the library collections are included when searching the ilissAfrica⁵ portal and that records are regularly exported to the Africa-Wide Information database (NISC).

The aim of this account of the infrastructure has been to illustrate the context in which the Nordic Africa Institute library can make a contribution to the wider community of researchers, students and other stakeholders, apart from collecting and preserving the African Street Literature titles. All of the nodes within this landscape enable the dissemination of metadata, making the titles known. Some of the nodes also enable delivery of the actual titles through their integrated interlibrary loan functionality – to students, researchers and the general public in the Nordic countries.

Final remarks

The first delivery of books to the library came in October 2017, about 40-50 printed titles mainly from Zimbabwe and South Africa, and librarians are kept up-to-date about the selection of electronic resources through the online collaboration tool. The library will continuously receive more material after each field trip that is made in this project. The librarians have continuously documented meetings and correspondence in their internal log book in order to keep track of the process and different questions that arise, around copyright, format etc. In the end they hope to publish an article on the project based partly on these detailed notes.

The African Street Literature collection will keep growing over time, at least for the foreseeable future. More than seventy titles are ready to be handed over from the researchers to the library and another collection trip is scheduled for the spring of 2019, this time to Lagos and Ibadan, Nigeria. Hopefully, the collection will be used by researchers from different parts of the world, teachers of African literature and students who wish to write essays and theses on alternative modes of publishing, emergent literary forms in African literature, digital African literature and related topics.

Works cited


Notes

1 Ready-made search to the collection, using a shortlink: https://bit.ly/2MOf98P. In principle, it is possible to find all the collection titles in the Nordic Africa Institute library by using the phrase “African street literature” when searching its holdings.
2 The blog can be accessed at https://africanstreetliterature.blog
3 https://www.exlibrisgroup.com
4 The Nordic Africa Institute library’s discovery search tool AfricaLit Plus: https://africalitplus.nai.uu.se
5 http://libris.kb.se
6 https://bibliotek.dk
7 https://leitir.is
8 https://bibsok.no
9 https://finna.fi
10 http://www.ilissafrica.de/en/