

Nigeria's 'Ink' Economy: Positioning the Creative Writer for Glocal Value Creation and Extraction

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ABSTRACT

The creative worker is an integral part of the new economy driven by the creative industries. In the concentric circles model of the creative industries, the creative worker is situated within the "bull's eye" or the core creative fields at the center of the model. This strategic positioning underscores the importance of the creative worker, whose intellectual exertions yield copyrightable products. This paper explores the work of the Nigerian creative writer as a content creator with potential to satisfy the demand of the local literary scene and the opportunity to capture significant value from the global marketplace. The paper discusses the economics, constraints and prospects of the creative writer's craft in Nigeria. Based on the identified challenges, it proposes the institutionalization of creative writing programs in universities, the establishment of an intervention fund to support creative writing and the strengthening of the intellectual property protection ecosystem in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, Creative writer, Creative worker, Creative economy, Creative industries, Creative writing

“Oh my God, the imaginative works coming out of this country are out of the ordinary! And the fact that they manage to win prizes outside Nigeria shows that it is not only our standards that are determining what goes on”

*Odia Ofeimun, author, former President,
Association of Nigerian Authors*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although creativity is as old as humanity itself, the concept of the creative industries is largely a development of the 1990s. Its formal origins are traceable to the establishment of the Creative Industries Task force within the United Kingdom’s Department of Culture, Media and Sports, DCMS (Flew & Cunningham, 2010). The DCMS, in defining the creative industries, developed a mapping document that identified 13 sectors that are situated within the creative industries. These sectors are: advertising, architecture, art & antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film & video, interactive leisure software, music, performing arts, publishing, software & computer services and television & radio (Higgs & Cunningham, 2007). Furthermore, the DCMS proffered a definition of the creative industries, which has become very influential (Galloway & Dunlop, 2007). It defined creative industries as “those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (DCMS, 2008, cited in Flew, 2011, p.9). Although this definition has been criticized for, among other shortcomings, lacking theoretical clarity (Galloway & Dunlop, 2007), it highlights some features considered salient for the creative industries, including individual creativity and the “generation and exploitation of intellectual property.” These two features define the nature of the work and the ultimate output of workers within the creative industries, the

creative workers. The term “creative workers,” thus defines a vast workforce of talented people applying their individual creativity in design, production, performance, and writing (Hartley, 2005). The work of creative workers is at the core of the creative industries. In fact, in the concentric circles model of the creative industries developed by the Work Foundation (2007), the creator of creative content is at the center of the creative industries. According to this model, “the ‘bull’s-eye’ represents where pure creative content is generated. This is the domain of the author, painter, film-maker, dancer, composer, performer and software writer” (The Work Foundation, 2007, p.102). Therefore, creative writers, like other creative workers, add value through their creativity (UNCTAD, 2010) and their work can be designated a core contribution within the creative industries.

Although definitions and models of the creative industries recognize the preeminence of individual creativity, it is equally true that most creative works are, ultimately, products of the pooled effort of several workers with expertise in different aspects of the product realization process. In this paper, we seek to explore the work of the Nigerian creative writer as a creative worker whose products have the potential to satisfy the demand of the Nigerian market and an opportunity to capture significant value from the global marketplace for creative writing. Admittedly, the archetypal Nigerian creative writer has gained renown on the global literary scene, but this paper argues that a huge, untapped opportunity exists for such writers to create and capture more value both within and outside the country.

Given the potential of Nigerian creative writers, it is our purpose to identify new opportunities within the context of globalization from which the Nigerian creative writer can extract value. We intend to explore the critical factors that

support/hinder the ability of the Nigerian creative writer to make creative products available to both local and global markets and extract appropriate value for creative labor. To this end, the paper considers not only the economics of creative writing in Nigeria but also the challenges and the prospects. We offer recommendations for the government, universities, the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), and the writers themselves to support the emergence of such an environment.

2. THE NIGERIAN CREATIVE WRITER AND THEIR WORKS

There are many creative writers in Nigeria. The country also has a thriving community of diasporic writers. The creative writer in Nigeria produces works that can be categorized by the following genres of creative writing: poetry, drama, prose fiction, creative non-fiction, children's literature, and script writing. The creative writer may have their creative output properly identified as theirs or they may simply ghostwrite for others to take credit. Though there are creative writers for, and consumers of, all genres of creative writing, poetry has only a limited readership and financial reward compared to prose fiction, although it is regarded as the "aristocratic genre" or the most prestigious form of literary work (Ezeigbo, 2008). Another genre that appears to have received scant attention from Nigeria's creative writers is children's literature. According to Ezeigbo (2008), the genre is not given the attention it deserves in Africa and few books are published. Similarly, Olubunmi (2015) suggests that the genre is dominated by imported books.

As the expression goes, the Nigerian creative writer has come a long way. Creative writing in Nigeria began in the 17th century, and the first creative writers were Islamic scholars, Abdullahi Suka and Wali Danmasani Abduljalil,

who, respectively, wrote *Riwayar Annabi Musa* (Life of Prophet Musa) and *Wakir Yakin Badar in Arabi* (Songs of the Battle of Badar in Arabic), both written in Ajami (Yahaya, 1998, cited in Fasan, 2010). Isaac B. Thomas wrote the first Yoruba novel, *Itan Emi Segilola Eleyinjuege, Elegberun Oko Laiye* (The Story of Me, Segilola, the Pretty Eyed, Mistress to a Thousand Men on Earth), which was published in 1930 (Isola, 1988, cited in Fasan, 2010). In 1933, the first Igbo novel, *Omenuko* (He Who Acts in Times of Lack), written by Pita Nwana, was published (Fasan, 2010). The earliest collection of Yoruba poetry in the form of hymns was published by Henry Townsend in 1848. Although the series of creative works termed the "Onitsha Market Literature" held sway in the 1940s (Fasan, 2010), the publication of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* in 1952 brought the Nigerian creative writing (and the creative writer) in English to international limelight (Awoyemi-Arayela, 2013; Fasan, 2010). Then, in 1958, Chinua Achebe, through the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, placed the Nigerian writer on the global map. Considering the insight from this short foray into the historical background of the Nigerian creative writer and their works, it would not be an exaggeration to state that before the advent of "globalization" as a concept, Nigerian creative writers were already operating on the global stage. Nigeria has produced many award-winning writers, including a Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka. Other prominent creative writers the country has produced include Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark Bekederemo, Ola Rotimi, Buchi Emecheta, Femi Osofisan, Isidore Okpewho, Chukwuemeka Ike, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Kole Omotosho, Ben Okri, Festus Iyayi, Akachi Ezeigbo, Sefi Ata, Helon Habila, Zaynab Alkali, Chimamanda Adichie, Teju Cole, E.C. Osondu, and Lola Shoneyin. Ironically, none of these writers writes in a Nigerian language, although some of the earliest creative works, as we have seen, were written in Nigerian languages.

3. TRAINING OF NIGERIAN CREATIVE WRITERS

There is the unending debate as to whether a creative writer is born or made. Although there are several creative writing programs across the globe, some argue that creative writing cannot be taught (Okediran, 2015). This argument, in essence, encapsulates the creative writing's version of the "nature-nurture" debate. Are writers born or made? Much evidence supports the notion that training has a role in building the competence of the creative writer. Indeed, some writers opine that by reading other people's works, they hone their own writing skills (Okoli, 2015; Onyema, n.d). The act of improving one's skills by reading the works of others is, no doubt, a form of training, albeit informal and autodidactic.

At present, no university in Nigeria offers a degree program in creative writing (Oluigbo, 2013), but many universities offer creative writing courses within English Language and Literature and Communication programs. Most training for aspiring and current creative writers, therefore, occurs at workshops (Okediran, 2015; Oluigbo, 2013), run largely by private organizations, some of which sponsor the workshops as part of their corporate social responsibility effort. Two of such workshops that have become fairly popular annual training events for writers are the Fidelity International Creative Writing Workshop hosted by Fidelity Bank Plc (Fidelity Bank, 2015) and the Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop, sponsored by Nigerian Breweries Plc (Nigerian Breweries, 2015). Both of these workshops attract award-winning authors as facilitators. But for such workshops, creative writers whose background is not in English Language and Literature or Communication studies – and the biographies on creative writing works indicate there are many of them – have very limited formal training opportunities. This reliance on workshops as a primary training ground for creative writers differs from the situation in the

US and Europe, where creative writing programs are often offered even up to the PhD level.

4. THE ECONOMICS

The two sectors that employ the most creative writers are the Nigerian film industry (Nollywood) and the publishing industry. The publishing sector contributes ₦25 billion (US\$79.55 million)—0.03 per cent—to Nigeria's GDP (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016a) and remunerates authors by means of royalties, usually paid annually. Many firms in the sector are not listed. It is, therefore, extremely difficult to obtain information on the finances of the companies and the amounts paid to creative writers as royalties. From available information, however, two of the listed companies in the sector, Learn Africa Plc (formerly Longman) and the University Press Plc, recorded revenues of ₦2.211 billion (US\$7.03 million) (Learn Africa Plc, 2015) and ₦2.44 billion (US\$7.76 million) (University Press Plc, 2014), respectively, in 2014. According to company documents, Learn Africa Plc paid out ₦341.6 million (US\$1.09 million) in royalties, while University Press Plc paid out ₦194 million (US\$0.62 million). Considering that the two publishing firms, in recent years, have been focusing almost exclusively on the production and marketing of text books for primary and secondary schools, to the neglect of creative writing works, it is not likely that more than five to 10 per cent of the accrued royalties would go to creative writers as royalties. In recent years, however, a crop of new publishing firms, such as Kachifo, Cassava Republic, and Parresia Publishers, that offer fiction, among other creative works, have provided a new outlet for creative writers (Shercliff, 2015). Kachifo Limited, for instance, has published many award-winning authors including Chimamanda Adichie, Biyi Bandele, Igoni Barrett, and E.C. Osondu. Details of the company's financial operations are, however, not readily available.

On the other hand, Nigeria's film industry, Nollywood, grosses US\$600 million annually and has a reputation for a high level of creativity, which has earned it international acclaim (Oh, 2014). Actors earn up to ₦600,000 (US\$1909), while a scriptwriter could earn as little as ₦30,000 (US\$95.5) for the same movie for which an actor receives so much (Emedolibe, 2012). In the early days of the industry, script writers were better remunerated, but with competition and a certain everyone-can-write attitude that has overcome the industry, the fortunes of scriptwriters have taken a nosedive (Emedolibe, 2012). Unlike authors of books, a scriptwriter in Nigeria is not likely to receive royalties for adaptations or remakes of films based on their initial script. Film producers prefer to buy scripts outright (Emedolibe, 2012), without the option of any future payments to the scriptwriter for adaptations of their work. However, to put the situation in context, the Nigerian script writer has other outlets for their creativity including documentaries, television drama, television commercials, and corporate productions.

The question that arises is: can creative writers survive solely on their writing effort? The response to this question differs from one writer to another. It appears that the more successful the creative writer becomes, the more confident they become that their craft can yield enough revenue to guarantee a modicum of comfortable living. But there is a certain cautionary note in the opinion of even those creative writers who believe they can live off their work. Odiya Ofeimun, a poet, playwright and former president of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) thinks creative writers can live off their works. In an interview with *The Sun* (2016), he said:

It's possible for writers to live on their works. Many Nigerian writers do live on their works. It depends on how you push the work you have. If you look at some of them who are winning prizes, they live on the book prizes

and, in another two or three years, they push in another work, which may not necessarily win a prize, but could advance the kind of invitations they get and lectures they deliver elsewhere. Since 1978, I haven't worked for anybody other than writing poetry and drama.

Essentially, Ofeimun thinks creative writers can make a decent living from other streams of income such as prizes and lectures made possible by their published works. He also thinks writers should promote their works. Toni Kan Onwordi opines that creative writing can be profitable if defined broadly beyond published books. He says:

Out of every one hundred writers in Nigeria, only two can be successful in terms of publishing. And that publishing cannot even feed them. Quote me: the only Nigerian writer who can live on his or her writing is Chimamanda¹. Nobody else can. So beyond the fact that you can write a poem or a short story, you have to learn to write other things that can feed you. Do you know that when a new phone comes out, there ought to be a manual, and somebody has to write that? (Okoli, 2015).

Tunde Babalola, UK-based Nigerian scriptwriter who has written scripts for widely acclaimed films such as *Critical Assignment*, *Last Flight to Abuja*, *October 1* and others, suggests that scriptwriting can also be profitable. He says:

Yes, it can be profitable. I only know of three scriptwriters in Nigeria (including myself) who are what I can call full-time writers. That is people who totally live, and live well, solely off their earnings from scriptwriting. Hence, it's not an easy gig, but the industry is growing and things are getting better. There's more work out there.... Perseverance and dedication is the key. Even though scriptwriters in the UK and the United States get paid a whole lot better, only a small fraction of them are actually

¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a celebrated novelist, nonfiction writer, and short story writer. Her works include *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *The Thing around Your Neck*, and *Americanah*. Some of the numerous awards she has received are the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book, Orange Prize for Fiction, Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, BBC Short Story Award, Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University, the fellowship of the Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study and the MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant. She facilitates writing workshops in Nigeria.

working at any one time. Most scriptwriters in those countries are out of work. It's a highly competitive field. The weak, the untalented can never survive in it.

On the other side of the debate are another former ANA president, Wale Okediran, and many authors. Okediran opines:

I will say it is still not conducive enough to make a living on books alone, even all over the world. For every big writer you hear [abroad], there are about tens of them who are just there on the fringe of survival. But, again, by the time we do further collaboration between the film industry and the writers, more money will soon come to the writers (The Sun, 2016).

Chinedu Ezeanah makes the same point when he says:

I think it is risky to be a fulltime author in Nigeria. It is dangerous to one's health and survival. So, anybody who is going to be a writer should have other job doing. To depend solely (sic) on books in Nigeria, I am not going to advise that. Even though I am trying to do that, it has not been favorable (The Sun, 2016).

Overall, it appears that it is challenging to survive on doing just one form of writing. At best, creative writers will live on the survival fringe unless they become very imaginative and expand their work horizon by making forays into new forms of their art.

5. CONSTRAINTS

The Nigerian creative writer contends with a number of challenges. One such challenge is getting work published. Getting published is so difficult that some writers now resort to self-publishing (Ajeluorou, 2014), which is not necessarily a bad thing if they can pay for high-

quality editorial, graphic design, and printing services. This situation is one of the corollaries of the tough environment for publishing in Nigeria. The economics of the sector dictate that Nigerian publishers focus on textbooks (Ajeluorou, 2014), to the neglect of creative writing work. It is estimated that 90 per cent of books published in Nigeria are textbooks, a situation that punishes creative writing work (Ike, 2004). The measure of success achieved by the new crop of publishers earlier mentioned in publishing and promoting a few award-winning authors indicates the viability of the sector if publishers are ready to do the tough work. With the presence of this new crop of publishers, creative writers with good stories are likely to find publishing and promoting their works less cumbersome.

Again, the culture of reading in Nigeria is regarded as generally poor (Aina et al., 2011; The Sun, 2016), a situation worsened by the advent of social media (The Sun, 2016). Therefore, many Nigerians are not buying as many books as they used to, or so the argument goes. This argument has largely been sustained anecdotally. Nwaubani (2015), however, offers a counterintuitive narrative of the brisk business importers of second-hand fiction and motivational books are doing. This report appears to refute the Nigerians-don't-read argument as there are strong indications that due to low purchasing power, many people cannot afford expensive books. Low-price books are more likely to achieve mass appeal and circulation. Moreover, the argument that time spent online could have been better used for reading may ring hollow as people read online, and there is a plenitude of high-quality, free content on the net. A systematic study of the reading habits of Nigerians, offline and online, may unlock some of the opportunities the creative writer currently misses.

Scriptwriters sometimes receive a raw deal in the hands of some producers. There are

stories of producers who refuse to pay the scriptwriter, or they pretend to reject a script only to keep a photocopy for later use, with minor modifications, all in order not to pay the writer (Emedolibe, 2012). This is frustrating for the script writer, who often thinks their work is not well appreciated, considering that actors are much better remunerated and more easily cloaked with celebrity status.

The other major problem bedeviling creative writers is copyright protection (Ike, 2004). Copyright infringement is so rampant that, based on this writer's observation, it appears that pirates often make more money than the authors of the works. The Nigerian Copyright Commission has the statutory mandate to ensure copyright protection in the country. The agency faces a number of challenges: poor funding of its operations, corruption among its employees, the generally accepted culture of buying cheap, pirated products, poor support by law enforcement agencies that often perceive copyright infringements as minor infractions, the lack of basic logistics such as transport for employees of the commission, poor use of information and communication technology (ICT) by the employees of the commission owing to their low level of competence in ICT, lack of adequate security arrangements for the safety of employees, and the low-level punishment meted out to copyright offenders, which fails to serve as a deterrent to would-be copyright infringers (Nwogu, 2014).

Thus, the Nigerian creative writer often struggles financially. According to Odi Ofeimun, writers must not seek to compete with film-makers, comedians, actors, and musicians financially (The Sun, 2016). But why not? Toni Kan Onwordi was in 2015 appointed brand ambassador for Samsung products in Nigeria, and expressed the hope that more writers would be so recognized (Okoli, 2015). Before Onwordi's appointment,

brand ambassadorship was a role reserved almost exclusively for actors, musicians, and athletes. With Onwordi's appointment, a new vista of recognition and opportunity might be on the horizon for the Nigerian creative writer. Indeed, it may be self-defeating for creative writers to believe that they cannot earn like actors, musicians, and footballers.

Now, beyond the creative writers themselves, how can Nigeria be fully integrated into the global creative economy to enable it capture more of the value created by its creative writers? A number of examples come to mind. Not long ago, Netflix acquired the distribution rights of *Beasts of No Nation* (based on Uzodinma Iweala's eponymous novel) for US\$12 million (Robehmed, 2015). How much of that will come back to Nigeria? How much of the value created by Nigerian creative writers abroad is retained in the country? For instance, Chinua Achebe's iconic work, *Things Fall Apart*, has sold over eight million copies and been translated into 50 languages (Urschel, 2008). It would be useful to understand how much of the creative value this work has generated has been captured by Nigeria.

6. PROSPECTS

In spite of the constraints identified in the previous section of this paper, the prospects remain bright for the creative writer in Nigeria. The large population of Nigeria, estimated at over 170 million, offers a market for the creative writer like no other in Africa. For instance, the children's literature genre offers a huge potential within the country. There are more than 27 million children undergoing basic education in public schools in the country (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016b). If each of those pupils reads just two books in a year, each of which costs ₦300 (US\$0.95), that market alone would yield 54 million books, worth ₦16.2 billion (US\$51.55 million), which is about 65 per cent of the current

GDP contribution of the entire publishing sector. This hypothetical scenario can pay authors royalties worth ₦1.6 billion (US\$5.09 million) in one year, using an average royalty rate of 10 percent.

In a similar vein, digital technologies offer a platform for the creative writer to reach a global audience and circumnavigate the challenges of regular publishing (Stewart, 2012). Creative writers who have no firm publishing contracts can use such platforms to give their works a global reach, while getting themselves noticed for publishing consideration. Further, low-cost options such as e-books and print-on-demand (POD) books are worth considering. Toni Kan Onwordi², a writer himself, recommends the writing of biographies as a money making venture for writers (Okoli, 2015).

Equally important, Nollywood and other film industries offer an outlet for creative works that can be adapted for film. A number of Nigerian works have already been turned into films (Ezeigbo, 2008), but more is possible. Wale Okediran opines that greater collaboration between creative writers and the film industry will support writers in their art (The Sun, 2016). Nollywood produces about 50 films a week (Oh, 2014), and the industry requires a steady stream of scripts to meet its prolific production needs.

7. CONCLUSION

The Nigerian creative writer has made their mark on the global scene. Nigerian writers can create great value on the local scene, given a more favorable operating environment. The current situation in which no university offers full-fledged creative writing programs bespeaks an apparent lack of appreciation of the enormous opportunities for wealth creation and employment that creative writing can offer. It is the considered view of this writer that

the establishment of full programs in creative writing in Nigerian universities will help hone the skills of aspiring creative writers. This is without prejudice to the practice of running creative writing workshops. The workshops should continue as a resource for those who may still not be able to participate in full degree programs and as a refresher for practicing writers.

The writers themselves should also go beyond writing and study ways of supporting the marketing of their own work, using tools made available by information technologies. Writers need to begin to consider the business side of their craft. They must see their craft as business, and be out promoting their works through blogging, book readings, book signings, and so on. The Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) can provide a collective platform for exploring global marketing and other opportunities.

For the government, the author of this study would like to propose that it consider a publishing sector special intervention fund to encourage publishing firms to publish more creative work, while making modifications in the curriculum to support the development of a sustainable reading culture, especially at the primary and secondary education levels. Such an intervention fund should be used for the development and publication of new creative writing works or for resuscitating moribund creative writing series or titles. The fund can also be used to develop e-books for those pupils who are ready to migrate to e-reading platforms. Making literature a compulsory subject at the early stages of education will not only support the work of the creative writer but also help nurture an enlightened and well-rounded citizenry that can compete in the global economy. The proposed government intervention is meant to have a catalytic effect on the creative writing sector for a short period, rather than become a permanent feature.

² Toni Kan Onwordi is a prolific and award-winning poet, novelist and short story writer. His works include *Nights of the Creaking Bed*, *When a Dream Lingers too Long*, *A Ballad of Rage*, and *Carnivorous City*. He has won, among other awards, the Ken Saro Wiwa NNDC Prize and the Heinrich Boll Foundation writing fellowship (Sources: www.bu.edu/agni/authors; www.african-writing.com; www.cassavarepublic.com).

At the same time, it is important for government to strengthen the intellectual property protection framework to protect creative writers from the menace of piracy. Perhaps the most viable way of doing this is to improve the funding profile of the Nigerian Copyright Commission and improve collaboration between it and the law enforcement agencies such as the Police and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). Without a solid intellectual property protection regime, the creative writer will continue to produce wealth for pirate networks.

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