

# Walter Bgoya

Transcription of conference on "100 Best African Books of the 20th Century"

*April 12, 2002*

**Ken Lohrentz:** I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to introduce our speaker for this afternoon and I'd like to say a few words not only about the speaker but also about the topic he's going to be speaking of today. Walter Bgoya, diplomat and publisher from Tanzania, has long standing connections with the University of Kansas, having been here as an undergraduate student in the early 1960s and completing his degree in 1965. I recall the time when I was so surprised to meet Walter I and see the name and wonder if there was a connection with one the secondary school students I was teaching at the same time as I was teaching in Tanzania, his name was Bgoya, who turned out to be his nephew, so I've had connections actually with more than one member of the Bgoya home over the years.

Walter has had a distinguished career, after he returned to Africa acting as diplomat and as publisher, which I want to speak in particular, as a former director of the Tanzania publishing house and more recently with an independent publisher \_\_\_\_\_ which if you know Swahili you'll know it means "Sphere and the Star".

In addition to his career in publishing, he has had valuable works about Africa in English and Swahili, he has had international goal in the promotion of the books on Africa and in articulating the problems of publishing and distributing books from Africa to the rest of the world. There are a number of important ways in which he has done that, he has published extensively with various papers about academic publishing and about problems surrounding the publishing industry in Africa and in promotion of the book. He had a role to play in the Noma award, which is an award given to excellence in publishing each year for various African books that are published anywhere in the continent of Africa. He is at the present time, the chair of the review committee which reviews the various publications for this annual award. In addition, he is very active in African Books Collective which is a very important initiative to address all this problems faced in promotion of African interests, making them available to a consortium of over 60 publishers whose publications have been distributed by this Collective, which is located in England. Also being available to various Libraries in the world, specially to English speaking world because all of the publishers with which African books Collective has a relationship are English language publishers, and it enables libraries to have a single invoicing procedure which makes it a lot easier to distribute these books and do business which is required to put these books on the shelves. African Books Collective has had lots to do with that and it's currently under important directors. He has attended many conferences in which these issues of books in Africa have been presented, so we are especially happy to have him today. The topic of which he will speak is very current in a sense, which is Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20th Century, and African publishers' response. Several years ago at the Annual Zimbabwe International Book Fair, the largest book fair to be held in the African continent, the idea came up from \_\_\_\_\_(sp?) who suggested this as an attempt to promote creative and academic constitution of various African authors by pursuing this very idea which eventually led to the 100 Best Books chosen. A special panel was chosen to be the review panel and that information is all in our website and in your packet for the program, including also the list of the 100 Best Books. This project has not been without its criticism, certain africanists

who have their favorite area or ethnic group or country or whatever it is, said 'but look there's no books in Hausa' or whatever their specialty may be and that may be true enough but it's rather arbitrary to choose only 100 books. The real idea for doing this was to try to promote the creativity and the scholarship and the accomplishment of various African Publishers and African writers despite the challenges that they face. And in that sense it does represent a broader role, not limited to just those books that appear on the list. So the idea is to use this in various promotional ways to continue attempting to promote African books this way. With that having been said, I introduce you all to Walter Bgoya.

**Walter Bgoya:** Thank you very much, Ken. With somebody so good at introducing you, you end up having little to say after, but I hope I'll still have something to say. I'd like to suggest that I speak for 20-30 minutes and then we can engage in a discussion. As far as I can see, there are too many areas of disagreement about the 100 titles. I think there are problems of presentation, or at least credit giving, this list can only obviously be 100 books from 1900 to 2000. There were a lot of books published in Africa, I think the nominations were about 1700 titles, so out of that to find 100 titles in gonna be a very serious problem. And so I can understand that some people are unhappy, I myself am unhappy because I think that some of the books I published ought to have been on the list.

But then if I didn't propose them, how in the world did I expect them to be considered. I think that this is one problem, many people are complaining about the titles not being on the list probably did not make the nominations. That is problem number 1. Problem Number 2 is that, and I know this from experience from the Noma award, there is a problem of reviewing African material. You don't want to take a Hausa book to Nigeria because they'll probably say it's the best book, so you try to find somebody who's not Nigerian and who knows Hausa, and that is not so easy. Or as we've had sometime one book from one small group in Namibia and we did manage to track someone outside of the world who could help us out, but that is one big problem in the African Publishing material appearing on the lists such as Noma award and in particular case the 100 best titles of the century.

Now obviously for a publisher, a strategy that enhances the profile of African books is very common. It's a welcome addition to the efforts that we make to bring African books to the mainstream of International Book Trade. For that reason alone we would welcome the initiative of selecting the 100 best African books of the 20th century. It's a particularly interesting idea for the writers because it highlights their successes. I'm not quite sure about encouraging authorship, quite honestly. I'm inclined to think that paying off as royalties promptly and marketing the books effectively so that royalties accumulate is probably the best encouragement needed. I don't know if you recall the story that Maximum\_\_\_\_\_ (sp?), he ran to a school to give a talk to school children and they asked him what could they do to be a writer and he said 'can you live without being a writer?' and the kids said 'Yeah. If you can live comfortably without being a writer, then fine, don't be a writer'.

What he was saying is that writers will write whether they have the incentive or not. If they are craft people you probably need to encourage them, but if they're really writer they'll write anyways. How are these books born?

Who encouraged these writers when they first began? You'll probably find that it was simply the artistic and creative urge that inspired them to do what they did. But I do understand from a purely strategic point of view in terms of marketing strategies and so that people know that these books exist, for instance, making Librarians like you know that these books exist, so that you can access these books from a particular source, that is important. And to that extent I definitely think that this kind of work is very important. Now that we've got the list, a marketing strategy for these books made by the publishers of those books, cause nobody else can take that job from the publishers of those books. And we already have a mechanism for the books that belong to the African Books Collective (for doing just that). This is what we might do for special marketing for these specific 100 titles, because we already have quite a few from offers that we stocked from African Books Collective.

Now I think however, I would hesitate to say this is the most ambitious high profile promotion exercise that the African book industry has ever undertaken. I think this is not quite correct, because it takes a lot of effort prior to this, the Zimbabwe International Book Fair for a start. This was the original idea that made this selection possible, so I can't see, well the children can be better than the mother, maybe, but I think that in this particular case the Zimbabwe International Book fair, African Publishers Network, ABC, Bellagio group, were important developments beginning in 1974 which brought this awareness and African books to the center stage. They managed to create the possibilities of publishing these books in Europe, America, in Asia. Even within Africa, interafrica scheme in which books from African regrettably after go to Oxford before they can go back to Africa. The problem there is that because this comes from some problems in the past with the payment systems. It was easier for Nigerians to pay or Tanzanians to pay a British book seller but not necessarily making the inter-African connections.

I remember I went once to Zambia because I was owed quite a lot of money, and so when I went to the university to ask for my money and they said 'yeah, we'll pay you once we finish paying the European publishers' and I thought 'this is really extraordinary, I come here to ask for my money and somebody tells me they'll pay me after they're finished paying the European publishers'. Anyway, that's the way it was. Things have changed slightly but not that much in some cases. Take Nigeria for example, getting books from Africa inter Nigeria is very difficult, it's much easier to get them from Oxford. So I just said that this is, at least in Africa, we got an understanding that what happened in Zimbabwe have to be the biggest, the best, the single most etc etc etc, this is a sort of Southern Africa attitude about what they do. We usually laugh at that in East Africa but that's internal politics.

Now I know the dreams outlined on the flyer of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, that little blue, green, flyer you have, is to make the 100 books a respected resource and marketing tool and I think that's definitely realizable. And again we have some experience from Noma award, it attracts interest from the big transnational publishing companies and the chances of these books appearing on literature lists in the countries in Africa improve, usually the print jobs improve, the design, the packaging and generally they often make more money. Usually once the book is taken over by a transnational publishing company in that respect, we lose it from the ABC because we only deal with books published by African publishers in the continent. Once it's taken over,

we lose that book. And I can think of books like *Bones*, \_\_\_\_\_(sp?), \_\_\_\_\_(sp?), books that we no longer could sell.

Now I think some problems with the list, some of the dreams on that flyer I'm afraid "god willing" that African books are gonna be truly mainstreamed in Western societies. We have a number of issues on debate now; one of them for which I have commissioned a study is why African novels don't travel in the West? That is something that is subject to quite a lot of discussion, we've asked professor Abiola Elele (sp?) to look at that for us because one of the things that we have discovered with Sweden setting up some kind of project to increase awareness of African publishing in Sweden, African Books.

And we were asking 'Why are you saying that in Sweden the reading of African literature has gone down?' and the Swedish couldn't quite answer that question, and some of us pushed because we had to know why it has gone down. But what we really have learned in course of our business is that African novels don't quite fit in the conception of the novel to the western audience. And some people just can't take the didactical aspect of the African novel because the African novel is teaching something and Europeans don't like to be taught too much, they like to kind of do their own things and discover their own things, unlike these big lessons being thrown at people. Now that is a discussion, a debate about the whole question of African aesthetics and post-African aesthetics and what that means in the western tradition and how you relate the two. This discussion has appeared to go on for a long time, they are the kind of discussion such as 'why was the Nobel price given to Soyinka and not given to Chinuachegue (sp?)?' Despite the fact that perhaps that Chinuachegue is much more appreciated in Africa than Soyinka and that's all debate. But part of what we think is the answer is that Soyinka appeals more to western literary taste. That's part of the perception and maybe we can at some point you librarians will be held for also, because you'll probably be getting responses from the audiences and people who buy the books. You can check books and why some books are borrowed more than others, I think you have that leadership profile.

Another thing that I thought this list does bring out; they say 'an attempt to find a regional balance'. One of the problems with trying to find a regional balance is that you may leave some very good books from one region and take some mediocre books from another region just to balance these. I'm not in favor of these, I think that if you have a lot of very good books from one region, take all the good books from that region, leave the junk from the other region. That's what you have to do. Because otherwise you start to make such compromises that in the end, literature suffers. But then life is about to make these things, so the jury decided to have a balance. I thought that the African language part was particularly sad, because and I don't believe that that's what Africa produced in terms of work in African languages, there is an enormous amount of work in Swahili which could have done better than this one book by Shavandra (sp?). And I don't even think this is the best book by the way, I think that one of his other titles would have been chosen. What they took was definitely not his most outstanding Swahili work.

There are some other things, as I said in the beginning, if one did not make a nomination maybe one should

shut up, can't say very much about that. But on the other hand, maybe it could have been possible for the jury to demand more because if they saw that a certain area didn't have sufficient material but knowing that there was a material, they could have done a little bit more to solicit nominations and they could have gotten more nominations. I think that they got quite a few from Ken, since you have quite good of a collection of African books in your library or some other library, libraries in the United States. I think that was a pity that the African language was so unrepresented. I tried to do some calculations about this and the books on the list in foreign languages are about 91%. So 91% of the books published in the century according to this list are not in an African language. Now there are some serious implications of this, you do realize that myth of Francophone and Anglophone is a myth. There's no such a thing, if you have 5% of the population or 10% of that population who speaks French, the population doesn't become French Speaking. And neither does the country become English speaking because 10% of that population is English speaking. So to call Tanzania as English speaking is ridiculous, it's Swahili speaking. And you could probably go to every other country and this would be the reality. But this list tells you 91% and then you have other adequations that would be developed along those lines and Ingugi (sp?) raises those questions in his approach to African literature, having moved from writing in English to writing and speaking Ricuiu (sp?).

He has quite a few things to say about that and one of those things is that how does language shape the pattern of thinking and therefore how do these books claim africanity and how much is non-Africa? Now this has been a debate that has been going on ever since I began hearing things about publishing and writing in the 70s. This is a serious question because you're saying that a lot of Africans have not read these books and are not going to read these books. So this list is probably not entirely for the African audience, it's probably very much external oriented. It's a list that is going to be read in Europe, in America, and you're going to talk about marketing and marketing strategies and distribution, we're talking about bringing these books to America and not so much bringing them back to Africa. I have my doubts, because we already have the barrier of the language. What would be interesting if we could develop this, have these books translated into African languages. That would be a very interesting project and that would be making the 100 Books of the Century an African project. That would be very interesting. I'd like to say that I've already translated one of these to Swahili, we did the translation of *So Long a Letter* by Maria Mabass (sp?), so I've got that translation in Swahili, some people think it's more beautiful in Swahili than it is in French.

Now another area we can address is children's books. Children's books have been put together with all other general books; it's a bit unfair to children's books and to the other books. I remember years back before I joined the Noma Award, one of the books published in Swahili, \_\_\_\_\_ (name) 350 pages, probably one of the earliest African novels, it was in the 40s in Chiquerede (sp?) and translated into English. I understand that was a little children's book, that's fine, it was a lovely children book that unfortunately is not even on this list but it's by the same author Meshack Kasari who wrote *Sosu`'s Call*. Now here you have a beautiful children's book and then you have a big book on medicine. I think it's unfair to put those two books together, I mean, choose one. But pick one you must because you have only one prize. So when I look at this list and there are 4 children book, I think this doesn't work. And I think I would seriously suggest that we brought out a list of 50 books or

something.

I know in Tanzania in the last 10 years we had a children's book project and we produced more than 150 titles of children's books in Swahili. It may be not be prize winning, but it's centered on children's books that had the potential to be read by African children. So these were some of the observations I wanted to make on this list of 100 Books, the Best Books of the Century. I was surprised that and I'm sure lots of people were, that the originator idea, Animas Rui (sp?) was written and published extensively, they don't even have one of his books on this list. Now I don't want to speculate about why that happened but that I'm afraid I cannot say because I could be in trouble. So there are these sorts of problems as well, where some books for some technical or some stupid reason which would now be on the list have not been on the list. I was very happy to find that Presence Africaine has quite a few titles because it's an excellent publishing house, which unfortunately is very poor at marketing and distributing these books but its contribution to ideas, especially for the French speaking world has been enormous over 40 some 50 years. So I was very happy to see that. Of the list of the 100 books, I was just counting, there were 27 African publishing houses, and it's not bad to have 27 publishing houses out of 100 titles. In that sense perhaps African publishing has been better represented on the list.

Now I probably can say a few more things, I should probably allow you to ask more questions. I was at discussion at the London Book Fair about this list but what I've seen about other discussions was very limited to the list itself. What people discussed was 'what are we going to do with this list now that we've got it?' And again, I've said I'm not going to get very excited when none of my titles are on the list, but certainly the publishers that are publishing these books will probably do very well now to make sure that the book is available, the book is in stock and possibly also for some of the books published in the early days, whose quality is not good, maybe they can redo new editions. This would increase visibility of the books, possibly also increasing sales of the book. That would be very important. But as I said, these were some of the discussions that came up at the London Book Fair, was you can't quite go out and print 10,000 copies because you just don't know, you may be on the list, but the book may not necessarily sell as much as you want, so the question of whether you can run a short print or a print in demand or just digital publishing or you can do 100 titles at the time, it would be the best way to handle this list so that it would be available very quickly in order to make the project live because it's directing interest and so on.

That was one point, the other point that came up was 'can we use that list to get to as many curricula as possible in many African countries?' But some of them of course are already on that list, Chinua Achebe Things Fall Apart is standard work. I feel that Diop's work is very good and I'm very happy that that book is on the list because it's a book that should be read very much in African Universities because it's a very very interesting work and very very good work. I was also very happy, although it wasn't listed on the 100 best books, but at least UNESCO was given special mention, it was really really good it got mentioned if not as one of the best books, certainly as one of the best intellectual works coming from Inesco.

Now the problems that came up were, these books had been done by European publishing houses which either collapsed or died or whatever, so where would people find the books? But then also there were works

like Soyinka`s which had been done with a British Publisher and is now with Spectrum and so there's not a problem there. But the listing obviously has the original publishers and I know there are some current holders who are complaining that they should have been mentioned as the publishers. I think that this is something that could be corrected very quickly and very easily.

Now my question is, do we wait for another 100 years? Because it's a bit of a long time to wait. I think it would be interesting to update this list every 2 years or every 3 years or every 10 years, I think you can make the season shorter or longer like 'the best books of the decade'. But we definitely don't have to wait for another century. Maybe in the future each region will decide on its best books, for instance. You have 5 African regions, South, North, East, West and Central and they could pick their best 100 books and then have 500 books coming from regional exercises of selection, we could have had better representation, but then I'm arguing against my other point that this regional business is a bit of a stopper if you're looking for excellence. But there you are, the kinds of things that one can think about. So I think I should stop here, and we can obviously exchange ideas, how about that? Thank you very much.

**Question from Audience #1.** Have any of these books to your knowledge gone out of copyrights?

**Bgoya:** Well, the first book there was published in 1925 by Mfolo. Now that would be 75 years, we don't know when Mfolo died, so that could possibly be out of copyrights. Then the second book was 1945, Cairo Trilogy which I think is super, everybody should read that. Just to brag a little, I met Mafu last year, I went to his house, delightful person. But stupid fundamentalists want to kill him, so he was surrounded by police, can you imagine? So I don't know, he's still alive, so of course it does have rights. Diop was 1955 but he's dead now. Oh that's interesting, he died 10 years ago, there's still quite a lot of time, 40 years before you can access that, so I don't think there will be many books out of copyrights.

**Question from Audience #2.** This is more of a comment rather than a question; it deals with one specific book on that list. It's a book called \_\_\_\_\_. It's a novel about the Rwanda genocide. And since you mentioned that Shavandra`s (sp?) book is not the best of his works, I think the same is true about this book, he's written 6 novels and I think he's one of the best practical writers around. In 1998 (4 years after the genocide) a man who runs a Book fair in France invited about 9 predominantly francophone authors to go to Rwanda for 2 months. This is one of the novels that came out of that trip. The novel came out in 2000 and currently it came out with stock in Paris but the edition came out here is by Nouvelles Éditions Africaines which costs 3,000 francs instead of 12,000 francs for the stock one. It's been translated into Spanish and the mission of this work was to get as wide an audience as possible which is why he wrote it quite fast, so it's not quite as good in style as the other books, not quite as well crafted. So it's been translated into Spanish now, I'm probably translating it into English and he is currently translating it from French into his native language which is Wolof. So this will come out soon too. Anyway, what this does it contradicts some of those important trends that you see African Publishers publishing something and makes it big and it goes to European publishing houses or something that is published in Africa gets translated into European languages. This is sort of going the other way.

**Bgoya:** This is the sort of thing we're hoping for. To tell you the truth, I tried to negotiate with the American university in Cairo about getting rights to do Nga\_\_\_\_\_ (sp?) work in Swahili, and I got the rights but I don't have the money because doing translation is very costly if you want to get a good translation. Again, we have sort of said about support for culture, so these costs including translation could be picked up by some big organizations and it could be something we could work out.