

Accessing Locally Authored Books | Book Publishing in Tanzania

A Conversation with Elieshi Lema

Podcast Transcript

Opening music

Genevieve: Welcome. My name is Genevieve Spicer, host of CODE's podcast series. We are recording in Canada's capital Ottawa, Ontario on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people. Today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Tanzanian author and publisher Elieshi Lema. Elieshi's 2001 novel *Parched Earth* won an honourable mention for the NOMA award for publishing in Africa, and her young adult book *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* was shortlisted for CODE's Burt Award for Publishing in Africa.

Elieshi is a founding Director for the Tanzania Cultural Trust Fund. She has also served on the board for the African Publishers Network, the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme and the Tanzania Media Fund.

Elieshi was Director of CODE's East Africa Program which included Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia. In that role, she oversaw the CODE Rural Library Resource Centers and the Children's Book Projects. Elieshi is currently Director of E&D Vision Publishing Ltd and she joins us now from her office in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Elieshi to start out with, could you tell us a little bit about how you started writing books for children?

Elieshi: I did not write anything until I got to university and at university, I started writing poetry - and this was in Dar es Salaam - when I was studying African Literature and English. And then my publisher published it in the collection called *Summons* and it was published by the Tanzanian Publishing House where I later went to work. When I go to Tanzanian publishing house I wrote a few children's books but really I was not familiar with the mechanics of writing, or the editing experience was [unclear] something about writing every time. When I went to the US I studied writing and I completed the cycle of generating, of disseminating and publishing books.

Genevieve: Wow, very Interesting. And, so you started off as a writer but then you're, you're now in the world of publishing. Can you talk a little about that transition?

Elieshi: Actually I started out as a librarian,

Genevieve: Ah

Elieshi: and then I went into university, I did a bit of writing, then I went into a publishing house and that's where I really started working with books and participated in the publishing process, and then I went to the US to study writing, so it has been a process.

Genevieve: In everything you've done, it has always been about books, right – whether you've been writing or-or producing and publishing them. Could you give us a snapshot, you know, of the publishing industry, the scene today in Tanzania – and maybe talk about some of the recent developments and opportunities that you see in the sector down the road?

Elieshi: The publishing industry in Tanzania has gone through cycles of growth and decline. Actually, reflecting, the government has forced it to be with booklets for the education sector. Education materials provision has been problematic and the government cannot keep up. And when they try to solve this problem they take over the publishing process, and when they cannot deal with it they give it back to publishers, and then now they are leading the publishing houses by themselves, they are doing the writing, publishing and distribution of books. So this is affecting the publishing industry very much, so despite the lessons or that the approach of the government doing everything by themselves, it does not help. And when that happens, publishing and the publishing chain gets particularly [unclear] because without the provision of books, provision and distribution, everything comes to a standstill in the private sector. The government is the biggest purchaser of books – there is very little buying from the public, from the general public. So, actually, we went through that process on and off, on and off, hopefully until we come to a resolution one day.

Genevieve: What do you see as some of the new possible innovations that could come about in Tanzania's publishing industry?

Elieshi: One of the new innovations that I think will transform the publishing scene in Tanzania is the production of digital books in establishing online platforms for people to access books and read. I think that *may* change completely even the culture of reading in Tanzania, because I think one of the problems as I mentioned that people don't buy books. You see, they would need to spend very little money – like 500 shillings – to be able to read part of a book several times, and I think this may make people read more, rather than purchase a book that goes to, costs as much as 15,000 or 100,000 and (unclear). So I think that innovation is very important, establishing an online library has a big potential to change the publishing scene in Tanzania.

And secondly, it will reduce the investment in book production for publishers, because it will eliminate the expensive aspect of printing, so that publishers can know that they only have to produce a (unclear) for level and then they put it online, so they don't have to print thousands of copies when they don't have the money to do that. So, publishers would probably feel more confident to produce books, rather than now when they know they can produce books but they cannot print them.

But I think most importantly, books will get to people where they are. They don't have to get out of their homes or schools or whatever to go and look for bookstores, which do not exist in most places in Tanzania. So it will bring to the publishers attention the kind of books that people need to read, because right now the book market in Tanzania is a very vague area, and so publishers really are publishing what they think they should publish, and therefore publishing is known as a (unclear) because it does not involve people from the grassroots. And not necessarily for them to write, but even to read, so if they don't have access to those books – if they cannot easily have access to those books, they are not going to be interested even in the publishing industry. So, I think this is an area that will need a lot of support, especially in acquiring the skills for maintaining an online reading program. So I think that's an interesting innovation that we are interested in.

Genevieve: Absolutely – and you talk about accessibility and I can completely see how this promotes anywhere, anytime reading ... for anyone! I ask though, in terms of accessibility does everybody have internet access to be able to get these books, or would they in this world of digital online books?

Elieshi: A large population of Tanzania has mobile phones because they use it for marketing their own products. So they could use it to read, and children could read at home using the mobile phone, something which is not happening at home, children don't read outside of school because they have no facility to read. You know, people don't look for books because they don't know where to look for books. At least they can get them in their own telephone, it would be very easy. It would be extremely easy, so I'm not – of course, there's the problem of electricity, and even having the computer or an iPad, but I think we could use the telephone to start, because millions of Tanzanians have telephones which they can use, because they are already using them anyway to get markets for their products.

Genevieve: And would this approach also breed a new generation of writer, that is somebody who learns how to write and produce a book online?

Elieshi: Indeed. Indeed! Because I think when you read you get motivated to write. Or to get involved in some kind of writing process, you know. But if you are not reading there is no motivation for you to do that. So you see I think that will be very good. People look at very useless things on their phone you know. Because, partly because, they need to spend their time doing something, and so they have to do something. If only they could spend that time to read. Either for themselves or to read to their children, or you know, it would be wonderful. I think that's what we need in Tanzania more than anything right now.

Genevieve: Are you seeing any movement towards making this a reality in the near future?

Elieshi: Oh yeah, we are working at it – some publishers are working at it. We at E&D are working at it, we've been working at it for some – a long time. There is of course the challenge

of technology, we don't have people who have the skills to develop an online reading program. But we are attempting to do it. I know additional publishers who are actually working on it, they want to access people to buy books online, you know at any place.

We all realize that now we have to move, not completely away from paper books, but we have to see that digital books are really the solution to a lot of our problems, a lot of our problems. We can even now promote reading in the community. Right now we are focusing on schools, as though schools are the only environment where people read.

Genevieve: If a young child were reading a book online, because it's linked to the internet and they didn't understand a word, they could click on that word and immediately get a definition for it -

Elieshi: yeah, that's right. That's right.

Genevieve: - so there's that extra layer of learning.

Elieshi: And children are very, they are curious people. They want to explore. So, they will explore, they will do things, they will read, and they will also *demand* a book. Like, you know, action books. They will demand, like, audio books. You know, I mean I can see digital books as the solution to - *especially* - to societies which are finding it difficult to meet the needs of their people. Because book needs for the people we are talking of paper books, and there are challenges -

Genevieve: production and distribution and sustainability...

Elieshi: Yes, yes. So, actually, online reading is the solution.

Genevieve: Elieshi, from your perspective as both an author and a publisher, why do you feel it's important for children to have access to high quality and locally authored books?

Elieshi: Well, it goes without saying that locally authored books would be more socially relevant than imported books. Locally produced books also will address issues of concern not only to children but also to communities in which the children and the authors live. Then there are issues of language, of images in children's books that will show images that relate to children and they will capture and recognize their own environment. Locally authored books are also sensitive to readership levels of children, of their educational levels and needs, and their approaches to learning, which is very important, the aspect of children's information books which are critically important to supplement textbooks. So actually, it is very critical that books are authored locally.

Genevieve: I understand that you have been very involved with Children's Book Organization in Tanzania - could you talk a little bit about the Children's Book Organization?

Elieshi: Yes. The Children's Book Project started in 1991 and was initiated by CODE. I think it's the best thing that ever happened to Tanzania with regards to children's books, authors and

publishers. The project has created a sustainable pool of children's book writers and publishers for many years, just by assuring a guaranteed market of 3,000 books for each title selected. The project has improved reading and writing skills within the school environment where they are working, not only to thousands of poor peoples but also to their teachers, and they are working on about 100 projects.

Children's Book Project has done so well that it has received several prizes, both international and national awards, and it has motivated the initiation of similar projects in many parts of Africa. Now, this speaks very highly of its approach and effectiveness. The challenge of course has been the inability for the project to expand and achieve national coverage, because this would involve participation of government in order to get the national coverage, so that, in the promotion of reading within schools and within communities.

So, a very progressive step right now would be to integrate some of these success stories into government and development plans, so that these can reach a national level, for the government to be able to retain literacy levels among the population, because CBP has done a lot of work within the communities, but unfortunately the government has not paid much attention to what CBP does. That notwithstanding CBP has lived for 32 years, and is now evolving into the Children's Book Organization, which will focus on accessing books for children in schools and in communities. I think this will, kind of, broaden the coverage of CBP and it will reach the people a lot more than just doing the program within schools. And we hope this one will be, will get support of, you know, CODE and their partners and also other donors, so that at least, for the first time, people can go to libraries in their communities and get books to read.

Genevieve: Could you talk to us about the Burt Awards which were run in Tanzania by the Children's Book Project?

Elieshi: That was a very good initiative, actually, because most writers in Tanzania do not write in English, and some of those books are used in secondary school – they are taken in as readers in English Language, and some of them are also used at university. Now, this tells you how discussed are books in English because at my university, I used books that were written essentially for other schools. It means they discussed their own books of literature in English. So, it would be good to continue that project, but I think also this responsibility of continuing that project would be on publishers, so that they can encourage their writers to write more in English. And when they produce more in English then they can lobby for these books to be used first in schools then in colleges and then universities.

Genevieve: What role do you see allied organizations like CODE playing to support the publishing industry in the future in Tanzania? What can these organizations do?

Elieshi: This is a very nice question, because it is only (unclear) in a situation of this kind, which was caused so much by the government, an organization like CODE has a lot to play – the support of an organization like CODE is very important to the publishing sector, because all the time, all the time knowledge is required. And all the time therefore books are required. And if the publishing infrastructure is not able to produce those books without support, or at least produce them sustainably, organizations like CODE will always be required. And CODE has

been very consistent in their support for books and learning, and their focus on children and books over the years has been very important because as you know it takes a long time to see the impact of literacy in a person's life or in the social development. Book needs can't be reaching an end, because new readers are always being born and entering school, and CODE has played a very central role for many years in promoting reading skills for children in Tanzania and other regions of Africa. As I said, it is unfortunate that readership skills are not really priorities of governments and therefore almost the sector relies on non-government organizations like CODE for support.

Genevieve: In your opinion then, from what I'm hearing, books then from Tanzanian authors are not as accessible as they could be for children and youth in Tanzania.

Elieshi: Absolutely right, they are not. Yes, and among the objectives of the Children's Books Organization is to access books, in schools and communities, to start with in selected regions of Tanzania, by stocking the libraries that exist. This approach has proved very effective immediately, it was – it was striking very clearly when CODE was supplying books to communities (unclear) in Southern Tanzania (unclear), people read – both children and adults – they read well until 11 PM at night, and the demand for books – surprise – was constant. This experience taught me one important thing, that people *do* read a lot, they just do not have a book buying culture. But without a book buying culture the publishing industry and the book chain cannot be sustainable. Therefore in my view, Tanzanian authors are not known to readers in Tanzania because people do not buy books for pleasure reading. And here the presence of community libraries *is* the solution. Where people can go and read books freely without buying them.

Genevieve: Could you tell us, so if one were to walk into one of these municipal libraries, how would they be organized - what would the youth and children's section look like?

Elieshi: There wouldn't be a large selection to choose from. It would be a collection of books from many places in the world because they receive the donations from outside, but as I said, donations have foreign everything. Foreign culture, foreign images, foreign content – so they are not very useful. But, most of the books in the library would either be old, would either be from other countries, most likely Europe or somewhere else, and not Africa, because African situations would be very familiar of course in Africa, and therefore we need a consistent supply of books in these libraries, without which these libraries they will read all the books and finish them and they will be destroyed before they get another replacement. So, we do have need for support in provision of books to schools and communities. Unfortunately, a lot of book support has focus on textbooks and not on stories. And again, this is why CODE's support is very important here because CODE supports stories and information books. And so we constantly have this lack of books in the libraries that exist - in some schools that have libraries because not all schools have libraries – we need desperately good support that will be, first of all that will last long enough, that will buy books in quantities that will make a difference.

Genevieve: And what quantity would make a difference – what would be a reasonable quantity to buy?

Elieshi: A reasonable quantity would be something like ... dependent on how many libraries would get these books, but it would be in the region of 500,000 – 200- to 500,000 would be much better say than 3,000 so that they would go to many, to many more libraries and if that supply would be constant, then a lot of people would be reading. And I believe when people read, they also get the motivation to buy. But when they are not reading, and when they don't see books, they don't get the motivation to buy books.

Genevieve: I would really like to get your reflections on the recent win, given what you've just shared with us, the recent win of Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Tanzanian-born author who just won the Nobel Prize for Literature this year. What are your reflections on his win? Will it bring the, you know, shine the spotlight on Tanzanian authors more?

Elieshi: It will. And people have been asking, how can we get books from Tanzania? How much do Tanzanians know this author? You see, Abdulrazak Gurnah has lived in England for a long time, and most of his books therefore are not in Tanzania, and when people heard that a Tanzanian has won a prize it's like whoa, how could that happen? You know because most people are writing in Swahili. And, so they were very happy though for the fact that a Tanzanian has actually won a prize. But his books are not available. So, you know, we are hoping that book shops will honour these books, get them into the book shops for people to buy and read. But I think it will motivate a lot of young people to start writing, to try in English. And now it's like, oh, it's possible to get international recognition. They just require the effort. So it will have an impact, it won't be in the short-term but definitely in the medium-term. People are still, 'oh – so I can write a book in English and hope to be recognized' so I think it has already motivated, especially young writers who are ambitious and would like to be recognized internationally.

Genevieve: Can you make any recommendations for books by other Tanzanian authors for our listeners?

Elieshi: I'm assuming your listeners are international readers. Authors that won the Burt Award, I think they are fairly good books, and you know Burt Award supported 21 titles. Nahida Esmail writes very well in Swahili, and she has won several awards, and also she writes in English. She has won – she won several titles of the Burt Awards. Elias Mutani also writes in English, Richard Mabala writes in English, one whose titles also won the Burt Award.

Genevieve: Well we will certainly point our listeners to – to these writers and also to our Burt Award recipients, and we are so incredibly grateful that you took to time to speak with us today, Elieshi, to speak to us about the publishing world in Tanzania.

I would like to thank Elieshi Lema for spending time with us today, and also extend a warm thanks to you, our listener for joining us. If you would like to find out more or find out how you can directly support CODE's efforts, I invite you to visit www.code.ngo to learn more.

Closing music