

ROMANCING *the* GLOBE: NIGERIA'S ANKARA PRESS

BY ALYSSA COLE

The first in a series of articles exploring romance fiction around the world

There's been a lot of discussion about diversity in romance of late. Romance, as a community, is striving toward becoming more inclusive and more representative of the world at large. An important part of this is remembering that romance is not limited to the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. There are romance communities all over the world, and although they consume Mills & Boons and Harlequin (just like us!), they're also writing and publishing their own stories.

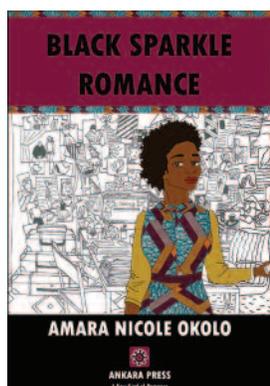
Africa, India, and Japan can serve as fun foreign backdrops in our stories, but those places also are home to romance writers working on their craft just as we are. It struck me one day that I knew nothing about these other romance communities, which is frankly ridiculous in a world where our international colleagues are one e-mail, tweet, or direct message away. In an attempt to rectify that, I'm reaching out to romance writers, editors, and

publishers around the globe and asking them for their thoughts on their local romance scene.

For this first article in the series, I spoke with Emma Shercliff at Ankara Press, a publishing house located in Nigeria. The press showcases progressive African love stories because, much like in the United States, romance can be seen as less important than literary fiction and other genres despite its popularity; the press hopes to change that. The imprint's first batch of novels features the work of six African romance novelists: Amara Nicole Okolo, Amina Thula, Chioma Iwunze-Ibiam, Ola Awonuibi, Oyindamola Affinnih, and Sifa Asani Gowon. The press is currently gearing up for their next round of novels, set to release later this year. Below, Emma Shercliff and the Ankara Press authors talk about their views on the genre, their literary influences, and the future of African romance.

Alyssa Cole: Ankara Press is a relatively new endeavor. Can you tell us a bit about the press and why you started a romance imprint?

Emma Shercliff: Ankara Press was conceived by publisher Bibi Bakare-Yusuf. Bibi’s vision was to publish “a new kind of romance,” with African settings, storylines, and characters. We wish to present positive role models for men and women, to show how a modern relationship can be thrilling and exciting, whilst at the same time being emotionally fulfilling and mutually supportive. Above all, we wished to foreground strong, capable female characters who are in control of their own destinies.



Cole: What is considered romance in your region? For example, by RWA standards, a romance must have “a central love story and an emotionally satisfying ending.” More specifically, readers and authors here believe a romance must have a happily ever after or, barring that, a happy for now ending. Can the same

be said of Nigerian/African romance? If not, can you explain any differences?

Shercliff: I would say that, yes, one prerequisite for African romance is that the book does have to have a happy ending—just as in America, readers come to romance for a degree of escapism, and we don’t wish to deny them that!

However, I think it is difficult to talk too generally of “African romance” as there are huge differences across the continent. There are other romance publishers in Africa such as Nollybooks and Sapphire Books in South Africa and Storymoja Drumbeats in Kenya, as well as successful self-published Nigerian romance authors such as Lara Daniels and Myne Whitman. There also is a significant informal romance publishing industry in the north of Nigeria publishing low-cost love stories, often in pamphlet form and released by the chapter. All of these publishers produce different sorts of romance, from the culturally conservative to the risqué. But the common thread is that the settings and characters of the novels are locally situated.

Cole: Are there any current trends in romance at Ankara Press? For example, here in the United States, we have cycled through vampire romance being the most popular, then BDSM, and then motorcycle gangs, etc. What interests authors at Ankara Press?

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— Amara Okolo

Shercliff: I’m not sure that we are seeing trends in the way you describe, perhaps because the romance writing scene is much younger here than in America. I would say that one trend is that our authors are exploring a wide range of social issues through their novels. Ankara authors use their novels to examine issues such as relationships between characters of different social class or background, single parenthood, office romances, career woes, even sexual harassment. So our authors aren’t afraid to tackle meaty subjects, even though the stories themselves are ultimately uplifting and enjoyable.

Cole: Why do your authors write romance? Do they get treated differently from writers of other genres?

Shercliff: A couple of answers from Ankara authors when asked why they write:

Amara Okolo (*Black Sparkle Romance*): I believe romance novels can be more than empowering . . . they can actually change a woman’s life for the better. In Africa, there is this sad notion that women should not be viewed as sexual beings, that we are just baby-makers and household labour machines. This notion has disconnected the real essence of the African woman, and that is why our young girls and ladies today just straight up let themselves go once they get married and have children. They forget that they have feelings, that they have the right to love and be loved, to enjoy a wonderful sexual life just as their male

counterparts. This shouldn't be the case. Before we become mothers, we were girls, ladies, women. Women with dreams, goals, things we want out of life. Women with expectations of loving and being loved. I believe that we shouldn't give up who we are no matter the path we choose in life, and in it we should stay true to finding that fulfillment, the essence of being an African woman who can love, live, feel, and have the satisfaction she deserves.

Amina Thula (*Elevator Kiss*): I chose romance because it's both easy and difficult—easy because it has a set formula, difficult because the romance genre has been in existence since the beginning of time.

“I also wanted to really reflect how we Africans experience romance. I wanted to do more than colour the characters.”
— Amina Thula

I also wanted to really reflect how we Africans experience romance. I wanted to do more than colour the characters. I wanted to showcase the challenges and dynamics we have nowadays as well as the journeys we often find ourselves in as we try to deal with them.

Cole: Do many of your authors read Western romance? What books, romance or not, have influenced your authors.

Shercliff: Yes, many of our authors do read Western romance, not least because there is only a limited supply of African romance, which was one of our reasons for establishing Ankara Press!

Here are the comments from our authors about their reading habits, particularly the books they read growing up:

Sifa Asani Gowon: I read a lot of Enid Blyton, and my mother only allowed me to read Mills & Boon novels by Betty Neels (the only ones “clean” enough for a teenager).

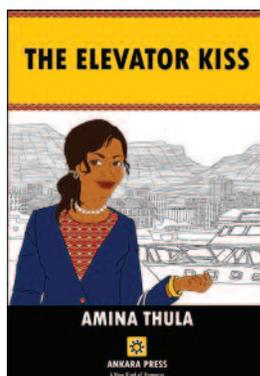
I also enjoyed reading [the] Baby-sitters Club series and then later books by Gilbert Morris. I absolutely adore Francine Rivers and Khaled Hosseini—I've read *all* their books! I also love Tosca Lee, Ginger Garrett, and Ted Dekker.

Amina Thula: My favourite authors are from my childhood and, with the exception of one, they write children's and/or young adult literature. They entered my heart at a young age and just never left. They are James Hadley Chase, Lyne Reid Banks, Judy Blume, and Paula Danzinger.

Amara Okolo: Enid Blyton's Famous Five, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Chinua Achebe's *Girls At War*, Buchi Emechata's *Joys of Motherhood*, and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. I also read quite a lot of the Pacesetter series while growing up.

Oyindamola Affinnih: The Enid Blyton series, Pacesetters, Mills & Boon. I started with a lot of Nora Roberts, so it's hard to look past. I love Sandra Brown. I like Jude Dibia, Chimamanda Adichie, E. C. Osondu, Maeve Binchy, Judith McNaught, and lots of others.

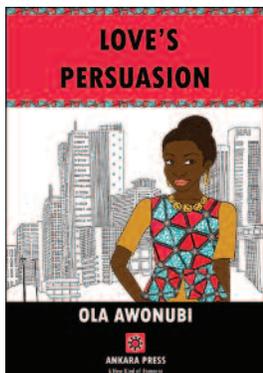
Chioma Iwunze-Ibiam: Growing up I read Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Mabel Segun's *My Father's Daughter*, Adaeze Atuegwu's *My Husband's Mistress*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and George Orwell's *1984*.



Cole: I noticed that your free Valentine's Day anthology (available at <http://www.ankara.press.com>) was translated into several languages. Can you speak a bit about publishing in a region where many different languages are spoken?

Shercliff: Yes, one of the features of the Valentine’s Day anthology that created the most excitement was the fact that we translated each of the seven stories into an African language and then recorded the story in both English and the African language into which it had been translated. We wanted to do this to reflect the diversity of languages spoken across the region and to show how romancing looked and sounded in different languages.

At Ankara Press, we publish in English because, thus far, it is the only language which is commercially viable for us. But we are extremely interested in publishing in other languages, which was one of the reasons we experimented with multiple languages in the anthology. There is a very large Hausa-speaking readership in the north of Nigeria, where there is a well-established romance publishing scene, and an established romance market in Francophone West Africa that we would be keen to explore. Both these markets have a big romance readership, and we would love to be able to share our Ankara novels with those readers.



Cole: Here in the United States, romance writers are primarily women. I noticed that several authors on your anthology are male. Do you know if this is reflected in the readership as well? And can you offer any additional insight into this?

Shercliff: The male authors you mention contributed short romance stories to our Valentine’s Day anthology—indeed, this was one of the aims of publishing that anthology. All six authors of our first batch of Ankara novels are women, and we are very keen to attract men as authors. With the anthology, we wanted to show that romance could be elegantly written by men as well as women.

Because the Ankara novels were released as e-books, we are able to track our sales fairly easily and, yes, we know that we do have male readers—although they are in the minority. However, I don’t think there is as much of a

gendered divide in romance readership in Africa as there may be in the West. In Nigeria, for example, it is not unusual to see men reading romance novels (usually Harlequin or Mills & Boon) at airports, and we know that lots of Nigerians, both male and female, grew up reading romance stories such as those in the Pacesetters or HINTS series, not least due to the limited amount of alternative reading material available.

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— Emma Shercliff

Cole: What do you see for the future of African romance?

Shercliff: I think the future for African romance is hugely exciting. We know from the wonderful response we have received that there is a massive demand for African-authored romance, and we really do see the entire world as our market. Publishing the Ankara Press titles in digital format and making the titles available in US dollars and British pounds, as well as Nigerian naira, was a deliberate move in that we wish to appeal to a global audience. And it seems to be working: in the past week, we have had website sales from readers in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Switzerland, Russia, the United Kingdom and Sweden, and our authors are excited to know that they have a worldwide readership.

Longer term, our aims are to publish male authors, same-sex romance stories, and in different languages—as well as ensuring our next batch of stories (due for release towards the end of 2015) are as entertaining as the first!

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