

Just as only blacks are permitted to talk honestly about race in the USA, so only an African can do so on that continent.

“What if Africa doesn’t feel like developing” would be my proposed English translation for the title of a book with a curious publication history. L’Harmattan, associated with l’École Polytechnique in Paris, first published it in 1990 under the title “Et si l’Afrique refusait le développement?”.

The phenomenon of a highly articulate African author willing to speak plainly about Africa’s problems slowly gathered a kind of cult following. Grioo.com, a francophone African web site, developed a very active discussion of its theses. A German publisher brought it out in 2001 under the title “Weder Arm noch Ohnmächtig,” which translates quite directly as “Neither Poor nor Powerless,” a curious choice that seems less reflective of the book’s substance. Last year’s appearance in Italy as “*E se l’Africa rifiutasse lo sviluppo?*” revived the original sense of the title.

The Italian reviewers’ titles tell the story. “Africa, it’s your own fault” and “Development? Africa doesn’t have any excuses.” The lead sentence of the latter translates as “Africa is backwards and stagnant because it rejects development with all its might.” The top German reviewer on Amazon calls it “Mandatory reading for all Third World Activists.”

There must be yet more story behind the story. A fairly persistent Internet search did not divulge Kabou’s present whereabouts and activity, though the Italian reviewer indicates she has been in exile in Canada since 1995. Though the biographical material on the book cover indicates that she taught university level English, the book has not yet appeared in our language. And despite the fact that the 1990 cover stated that she was in the process of writing a book entitled “The African elites of the 1970s,” nothing new has appeared under her name in these fourteen years.

Kabou’s first chapter echoes the title. “Africa doesn’t want to develop.” To roughly paraphrase her lead paragraph: “Certain ideas owe their durability to the nobility of their context. You have to believe in Africa’s will to develop in order to justify its fight for independence. Development is among those venerable beliefs that one cannot abandon without committing a sacrilege. However, all appearance are to the contrary. Why is the international community so upset, after thirty years, that things are as they are?”

The myth of Africa’s will to develop, she says, satisfies three essential needs. First, to excuse the political class of any suspicion of incompetence by turning the argument towards an interminable international plot, because they can justify staying in power as long as it endures. Secondly, to place Africa permanently among those parties whose energies are diverted to frivolous development projects. Lastly, to enrich the legions of experts on perpetual missions and studies the futility of which suffers no discussion.

Thus, by page two the theme of the book is well established. The reader immediately knows whether to love it or hate it. Kabou, in her somewhat highflown and literary French, composes some delightful turns of phrase to advance her arguments. Her language is the book’s greatest strength. Organization is weaker. One comes away with a good many pithy quotes but little sense of thematic development, inasmuch as she drives home the same points chapter after chapter. Her issues are:

1. African pride is offended by the observation that their culture has invented nothing and created nothing. They are too proud to adopt the Western concept of development.
2. Africa imported a series of intellectual models from the missionaries, communists, capitalists and third-worlders, all of which were used by elites as excuses to bolster their autocracies, and none of which were appropriate to the African environment.
3. There is nothing wrong with the intelligence of Africans. Their inability to develop is attributable to illiteracy, a late start in development, and the profound sense of inferiority fostered by the westerners with whom they have come into contact.
4. Africa's refusal to develop is central to its sense of self. "Africa isn't dying: she is committing suicide in a kind of cultural drunkenness, intoxicated with her own moral gratification."
5. Africa has no tradition of self analysis. No politician can afford to tell the truth. She cites the fates of those who have attempted to do so. As noted above, one could probably add the name Kabou to that list.

6. Africa is neither poor nor powerless (the title of the book in German). She has been an equal party to, and is hence at fault for creating the supposedly unequal contracts, treaties, and debt obligations of which she continually complains.

Though Kabou doesn't provide it, a bit of history is essential to her argument. African slaves appear commonly in Greek and Roman accounts, and the Arabs had maintained an active slave trade on both coasts of the continent since Biblical times. Modern Europe first established contact with black Africa through Henry the Navigator's search for India in the mid 15th century. European law, inherited from the Romans, fully described a slave's position in society. It was a matter of chance that other institutions such as serfdom were better suited to Europe's culture and economy. Portugal had no particular use for the slaves Henry's seamen brought back. There were more than enough landless peasants who could cheaply accomplish whatever menial work needed to be done.

Black slaves were initially a solution in search of a problem. Portugal devised the problem herself with the discovery of the warm, fertile and uninhabited Atlantic island of Madeira. It was ideal for growing sugar. Since farm laborers had to be imported in any case, why not use the Africans? That model had proven to be an economic success by the time Europeans turned to exploiting the agricultural possibilities of the New World.

Three centuries of European slavers had no desire to penetrate the continent's interior. They were perfectly content to let Africans bring their African captives to coastal slave markets, which with their myriad diseases were insalubrious enough. The entire dark continent north of South Africa was still virgin territory when Dr. Livingston searched for the source of the Nile in the mid 19th century. The European powers, having long since colonized all of the Americas, India and the Far East, turned to equatorial Africa only after all else was taken. Black Africa bore the yoke of colonialism well less than a century. Though it was onerous indeed in places, such as the Congo as Belgium established rubber plantations, most black Africans were not much affected by European pretensions of sovereignty. It is clear beyond a doubt that black labor was more ruthlessly exploited, over a much greater period of time, in Brazil, the Caribbean and the United States. The success of countries with longer and harsher colonial histories, and of blacks themselves outside of Africa, makes abundantly clear that colonialism cannot be the root cause of Africa's problems.

Kabou says Africans cherish the myth of an edenic life before the arrival of the Europeans. "Everywhere," writes Mohamadou Kane, "the thesis is the same, pushed by the works of historians and inspired by the nationalisms of the hour, to know that traditional Africa was a coherent and dynamic world the functioning of which was blocked by the Europeans and which therefore provoked a decline." Included in the myth are histories of great empires, peaceful coexistence among tribes, and abundant literature and culture.

Kabou defines five philosophies, more or less equated with historical epochs, of African's relationship with the West:

Missionary

Third world Marxist

Neo-liberal, that is to say, IMF and World Bank

Leftist reaction to Western influence and return to original cultures

The cold war muddle

She rejects the idea of an innate inferiority, suggesting rather that Africans, only recently as much as 20% literate, may ground their opinions of development on 19th century European notions of race. The occident's pretensions of a "mission civilitrice," or civilizing mission, did not disappear with independence, but were rather heightened by the tensions brought about by the cold war.

Kabou writes on the ravages of "Fridayism." Daniel Defoe's literary invention thrives on the anti-dependence theme of authentic, endogenous development. Did Levy-Bruhl write that they are childlike? Did Octave Mannoni write that they instinctually see the European colonizer as their superior? Kabou maintains that Africans feel they must continually disprove these myths, dating from missionary times, of their inferiority by demonstrating that they envy nothing of the occident, that they want to guard their own

culture souls against the penetration of modernity. Kabou continues with the biting observation that anyone who has visited Africa will confirm it is hardly in danger of Westernization.

Fridayism, "Vendredism" in the original, is the mystical belief that the tradition of doing nothing will carry the African through. White men have nuclear arms? They will blow themselves up. They have invented airplanes? They will die in crashes. They have a materialistic culture? They will lose sight of their traditional values. Kabou says that the Africans contentedly wait in their villages, letting time pass them by, as they wait for the developed world to collapse of its own weight.

Fridayism is the second of Africa's two faces. She quotes Robert Arnaut and Edgard Hazoumé claiming it "has at least two faces, a formal face of numbers, statistics, official declarations, the flip side of which is everyday life ruled by sinuous laws and the unspoken secret codes the observance of which impedes the imperatives of development." The elites appear ashamed of their occidentalism and work to present themselves as true to Africa's culture and traditions. "One cannot but be struck by the tenacity with which the Africans refuse methods and organization. They squander their meager resources, sabotage all that which might profit the greater number over the long term. They detest coherence, transparency, and rigor. Every level seems to favor tinkering, improvisation, and navigation by eyeball."

Fridayism is a rural mindset, and she observes that rural life works fairly well. Within the discipline of tribal life everyone has a role. The tribe has little use for layabouts. They plant, they hunt, they gather, they buy and they sell. It falls apart in the crush and anonymity of the cities, in which no tribal order is imposed and no tradition dictates how one will occupy one's time. "The refusal to develop ... flourishes less in the villages ... than on the macadam of the capitals where one sees how true African values have vanished since independence." She continues that it is paradoxically the Minister of Development, the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Education who continue to trade on the wars of liberation as excuses for the striking immobility of modern Black Africa.

Kabou holds the Japanese up as a model to be emulated. They are another people upon whom the Europeans dominated militarily and looked down, but who were wise enough to distinguish what was worth borrowing from the invaders from that which was worth keeping of their own tradition. The result is a society that is both materially rich and very traditional.

"African Mentality" is a theme to which she returns so repeatedly that it begs the question of how the book is organized. She cites the authors of theories of ontological superiority based on cranial capacity, culture, etc. On every occasion, never citing by whom, she asserts that the issues have long been laid to rest.

Her repeated explanation of why Africans have never invented anything of note, display little curiosity, and are unable to devise or follow organizational systems in either enterprise or government is one of proving the white man wrong. She imputes to every African the attitude that "the white man thinks his is the only way to live and I am primitive for not adopting it. I'll show him." The African is too proud to do things the foreigner's way. It is the "self esteem" argument that has held sway in the United States since Brown vs. Board of Education. Kabou notes, however, that most peoples of color in Latin America and Asia have successfully borrowed from Europe.

The government of India is alleged to have surveyed the rural population around 1957 to determine how their lives had changed in the ten years since the end of the two-century British Raj. Three out of four never knew the British had been there. Likewise, it seems probably that even today, and certainly for most of the past four centuries, the average African has had too little contact with Europeans to have nursed any notion of inferiority.

Occam's razor proposes that the simplest explanation of any phenomenon is the most likely, the default to be disproved. It would hold that absent any proof to the contrary, the demonstrated levels of African organization, literacy, creativity and enterprise reflect the people as they are. That mere assaults on the Africans' collective self esteem could account for so much dysfunction over such a long period is the theory that begs for support. Two books that go straight to the point are "IQ and the Wealth of Nations" and "Race Differences in Intelligence." Both are politically incorrect to the extreme, but their statistical

analyses have never been refuted, successfully or otherwise. They have, however, been successfully buried.

Kabou often touches on the lack of scruples of the higher classes. These would be for the most part the educated elites, the civil servants and government officials. She finds their rapacity, or "dents longues" inexcusable. Any official who can do so loots the government and whatever investment funds enter the continent under whatever program. An entrepreneur will get a loan, sell the shell of the business to the government at a huge profit in a "nationalization" move, or vice-versa, buy a business from the government for a song.

She notes elsewhere that corruption pervades African society. Theft is endemic. Everyone has their hand out for a bribe.

Applying Occam's razor again, it is worth questioning whether the "take the money and run" attitude makes sense in its context. The alternative of honoring contracts, investing, and long term planning is predicated on expectations about the future. It assumes that labor and capital can be organized to produce a profit, that the currency will be stable and exchangeable, that government will enforce contracts and respect private property. If the people are smart enough to recognize that they are incapable of organizing and managing for a profit, it is rational to export, hide or spend rather than invest capital. As Kabou notes, the queue of first world do-gooders willing to throw more money into Africa seems never to end. They meet their fundamental needs by debt, deception and improvisation.

Two recent books illustrate the more recent problems of Africa. "The Crisis Caravan" documents how Western do-gooders and media feed the problem, and "Into the Cannibal's Pot" is a sobering history of South Africa's slide since the black majority governments came to power in the 1990s.

The lack of African unity. Fragility of the OAU.

The presumption of African leaders. Houphouët-Boigny refusing to sell his resources "below market" and

Africa has two faces. First the formal one of figures and statistics and official declarations. She suggests these are hasty and "suicidal" assimilations into a very traditional culture.

"I am black. The Black didn't invent the computer. The computer is anti-black." and "Technology degrades family life and human relations. Even the Occidentals say so. Therefore, Africa ought to reject technology." and "We are victims of colonialization, so the Europeans owe us indemnities." These views are taken defensively, she says, in defense of Africa's refusal to develop itself. "The sociological and especially psychological conditions of the success of free enterprise are not met yet in Black Africa, far from it. Their emergence initially depends on the introduction of a vast debate on post-independence African mentalities, and the relationship of the latter to the concept of development itself. Africa must be invited to reconsider its ideological and social choices, to be brought to understand clearly why generalized economic liberalism can lead only to catastrophe. In other words, instead of encouraging the Africans to cut their throats by programs self-imposed austerity and deprivation, we should first seek to know why audacity, imagination, and inventiveness remain so rare after thirty years of independence. One needs, in a word, to realize that Africa saddled itself with a powerful cultural device making it possible to repress any desire for creativity." Aren't these almost an echo of the complaints about black schoolchildren in the United States? And if so, are blacks being somewhat unfair when they blame their situation on white racism?

The notion that Africa is undergoing cultural change is a myth. Today's African mentality is a kind of jail in which an impervious border separates the notions of "a Black thing" and "a White thing." . Indeed, far from prefiguring a promising a liberating synthesis of new energies, this conscience is a rather desiccated object surrounded by barricades. The fallaciousness in the dualism of "tradition and modernity" is in this: it postulates the progress of mindsets towards an opening which will occur all the less because African sensitivities are ossified and shrunken and contorted after having demonized the values of modernity. This drama is far from being finished. We will see it when we address the current misadventures of the negrism. For the moment, let us specify that, as opposed to what implies a African literature of African identity which would preach reconciliation today, after having promoted, from 1960 to now, the myth of a conflict