Notes

Kristina Bekenova (ed.). *In Their Own Voices*, Stuttgart, Ibidem Press, pp. 120

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For three years (2015-2018), Kristina Bekenova collaborated with an online journal -- *African Politics and Policy* -- to produce monthly reviews on African culture. She wrote several articles and short essays, and interviewed emerging African leaders as she believed, and rightly so, that this would be the best, most effective and efficient way to make Africa's voices heard. As such, the voices *In Their Own Voices* speak as one voice: the voice of hope.

As noted above, these interviews gave Africa's young and emerging leaders an opportunity to explain what Africa needs most, what the leaders are doing about it, what do they envisage for Africa, and how will such visions be reached. Bekenova's interviews embraced a plurality of voices; including those of musicians, poets, artists, doctors, philanthropists, environmentalists, defenders of animal rights, tour operators and treasurers of traditional culture. These were from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, the Gambia, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somaliland, South Africa, South Sudan and Zimbabwe. It was revealed that while they all share, implicitly or not, a genuine commitment to making Africa grow and develop, they however have very different perceptions of what should be done to ensure Africa's success and prosperity. For example, some of interviewees believe that Africa needs better public health, while others believe that more should be done for African children. Also, whereas others believe that Africa's development should go hand in hand with the preservation of traditional knowledge, others believe that Africa's development should be coupled with the protection of the environment. However, in spite of the different perspectives that emerge from Kristina's interviews, one can detect a common theme: all, to a greater or lesser extent, believe that Africa's rich and diverse culture is the single most important ingredient for ensuring Africa's success in the years to come. A plurality of voices delivered this simple message.

The importance of African culture and of African civilization can hardly be overestimated. African problems need African solutions, and these solutions will have to emerge from the young leaders that are well-informed by African culture. Unorthodox observations like that of France President Macron, that Africa's main problem is civilizational, is unacceptable because African civilization is not the problem but a source of solutions for the problems that the continent is facing.

Important as African culture is, Bekenova's book has a second -- and possibly more important – message: Africa has a large number of talented young leaders in different fields whose talents need to be nurtured, protected and preserved. These young and emerging leaders have the talent, resilience, drive and passion to tackle Africa's problems, by identifying and implementing efficient solutions, as well as creating the requisite conditions for Africa's successful development.

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Analyzing the conditions that allowed African countries to enjoy sustained strong growth and experience socio-economic development for nearly three lusters, Pelizzo, Kinyondo and Nwokora (2018) suggested that Africa's progress is subject to both domestic and international factors. The rise of China, debt relief, international and foreign direct investments; coupled with improvements in public health and in the quality of government: all have created the conditions for Africa's sustained economic growth from 2000 to 2014. This economic success was responsible for the increase of Africa's income per capita, literacy, and average life expectancy; as well as a decrease in infant mortality and the percentage of workers employed in the agricultural sector. The first fourteen years of the new millennium were a clear developmental success for the continent, though, of course, there were considerable cross-country variations in how well or how much individual African countries developed in the period under consideration.

By 2015 Africa found itself at crossroads (Pelizzo et al., 2018). While several factors could justify analysts' optimism about Africa's chances to make further progress along its developmental path, by 2015 it had become clear that some of the conditions that had enabled Africa's economic performance were disappearing: China's economic growth had started to slow down, the quality of democracy had started to decline in several African countries, the size of international aid and the inflow of foreign direct investments had started to decrease; while public debts had started to rise, and in several countries, public health had started to deteriorate. As such, more diseases, less democracy, political instability, violence, fewer investments, less aid and a growing debt posed a threat to Africa' ability to experience strong economic growth in the years to come.

One of the several recommendations as to what should be done to keep Africa on the right developmental path was to "… adopt properly functioning institutions, and to create the conditions for the emergence of better political leaders throughout the continent and allowing for alternating leadership in power" (ibid: 280-281). One of the major observation is that Africa's problems stem from the simple fact that it does not have the kind of leaders it needs. Political corruption in South Africa, economic catastrophies in Zimbabwe, a bloody civil conflict in South Sudan, the persecution of the Anglophone population in Cameroon: all are due to the fact that each of these countries lack the kind of leaders and leadership style that they deserve.

Africa needs new and better leaders. Africa needs its younger generation to express a new, and much improved, ruling class.