

Challenge put to African intellectuals

by Bah Thierno

Et si l'Afrique refusait le développement?

by Axelle Kabou

Editions de l'Harmattan, France, 208 pages

Mrs. Kabou's book, whose title means "What If Africa Refused Development?" sparked an interesting debate last October at a conference sponsored by two overseas African organizations, Conced and ATAF. Without covering all the aspects of a very dense book, Axelle Kabou responded to questions from an audience of Africans and friends of Africa who showed up in large numbers.

In her opening remarks, Kabou explained that she wished to upbraid the intellectuals, and "send up an alarm and a call to revolt against holding back the development of the African continent." According to her, skilled African cadres should stop wailing over the periods of slavery and colonization. There is not a single people in the world that has not been dominated by some other people at some point in its history. Africa doesn't have the monopoly on that. In contrast to the other peoples who have integrated, to their benefit, the mixture resulting from these encounters, the Africans have become bogged down in their refusal to do it.

Kabou believes that the backwardness of the continent can be largely attributed to a cultural blocking which deprives Africans of access to universal knowledge and to utilization of technology in the service of economic, social, and cultural development. The blame for the present chaos falls on the independence generation, which was unable to either define or direct a clear policy. She rejects the negative heritage of leaders who have pawned the future through an enormous debt load which has brought not a single economic or social dividend for the populations.

In her view, the generation born after independence has no reason to service this debt any further, since they had nothing to do with it and have not benefited from it. Kabou sees a grim future for African youth. Unemployment, including inability to find jobs for college graduates, expansion of endemic and epidemic diseases, AIDS, aggravation of the

poverty that makes up the daily bread of the majority. For all these reasons, she does not believe in regional integration, which would simply add the poverty together.

Some tough questions from friends

Several concrete situations were brought up in the question period. For example: Could she explain how two equally rich countries such as Ivory Coast and Guinea, with two diametrically opposed political systems (Ivory Coast's liberalism, and total state control in the Guinean economy), could have arrived at the same economic result after 30 years of independence? Unemployment, no jobs for college-educated youths, non-payment of civil servants' salaries, non-payment of both domestic and foreign debt?

In fact, Kabou has approached the problems of the development of Africa only from the standpoint of communications ideology and sociology. She has not taken political, economic, or technological aspects into account, or the one-party systems that endured for more than 30 years thanks to the benevolence of successive French governments. In these conditions, competent African intellectuals were caught in a trap: either collaborate or be put in prison. Many of them refused this alternative and sought exile, thereby remaining away from events.

This exclusion of African patriots has blocked the evolution of African states toward economic and social progress. It has created and enlarged the chasm between the leadership and the people, and between the generations. It explains to some degree the rancor of young skilled cadres toward their elders, and the refusal of the latter to hold dialogue with their younger challengers. The young people think that they are not going to honor the debts contracted in the name of the people by political leaders who didn't give them the least thought.

In conclusion, as Mrs. Kabou put it, the development of Africa will occur through the capacity of Africans to master scientific knowledge, to master high-level skills and technology in order to utilize them in the service of man. For this, Africa must build nations and transform our raw materials on site by building factories at home. We Africans must rationally utilize our competent skilled workers and reward personnel for merit.

Books Received

Malcolm, The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America, by Bruce Perry, Station Hill Press, Barrytown, N.Y., 1991, 542 pages, hardbound, \$24.95.