

Book Review

Editor: Kristina Bekenova

Title: ***In Their Own Voices: Conversations with African Emerging Leaders***

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Reviewer: **Riccardo Pelizzo***

For three years (2015-2018), Kristina Bekenova collaborated with an online journal called **African Politics and Policy**. In this period, she managed a monthly review on African culture, wrote several articles and short essays, and interviewed emerging African leaders because she believed that this would be the best, most effective, and efficient way to make Africa's voices be heard.

Their Own Voices is organized in three broad sections. The first section is devoted to arts and culture. This section, which is the book's largest, includes eight interviews. The first chapter is based on an extensive interview that Bekenova conducted with Lamin Bojang, founder of the Gunjur Village Museum in Gambia--a museum that was set up to ensure, in Lamin Bojang's words, "natural culture and history preservation." The second chapter is based on an interview with Efe Paul Azino, director of the Lagos International Poetry Festival. The purpose of the festival, in the words of Efe Paul Azino, was to bring "... poetry into engagement and conversation with society and with itself." The third chapter reproduces an interview with a Zimbabwean sculptor, Pularz Prumender Bangura, who spoke about Zimbabwean artists, artistic traditions, and the challenges facing an artist. The fourth chapter presents a conversation with Rwandan musician Marchal Ujeku who keeps alive the Nkombo music and tradition. The fifth chapter results from an interview with Manasseh Mathiang, Campaign Leader of the AnaTaban Movement that brought together a wide range of artists with the purpose of promoting positive change in South Sudan. The sixth chapter is based on an interview with Belamy Paluku, musician and Director at the Foyer Culturel de Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who spoke about the mission of its institution, its successes, and disappointments. Chapter seven reproduces an interview with Jean Claude Muhire, founder of the Love the Kids Foundation from Rwanda; while Chapter eight is a conversation with James Kitchen, Executive Director of Light of Youth Creative Organization, a Lilongwe-based theatre institution.

The second set of interviews featured in the volume is devoted to natural heritage. Four interviews are included in this section, and they are devoted to bird-watching in Gambia, to the Environmental Concern Group/Gunjur, to travelling in Somaliland and to the Outraged South African against Rhino Poaching. The third set of interviews, which includes three interviews with officials and representatives from Light for the World, is devoted to public health issues and disabilities. The striking feature of the

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book is that, in spite of the fact that the interviewees come from different countries, have different interests/backgrounds, and operate in different sectors, all seem to be confronted with almost common challenges, and specifically in most cases the key challenges were the lack of government support, proper policies, and funding opportunities.

These interviews discuss problems and prospects, successes and challenges; and by doing so, they gave Africa's young and emerging leaders an opportunity to explain what Africa needs most, what they are doing about it, what vision they have for Africa, and how they think such vision can be implemented. The interviews revealed a plurality of voices as Kristina interviewed people from different walks of life: musicians, poets, artists, doctors, philanthropists, environmentalists, defenders of animal rights, tour operators and treasurers of traditional culture and from different countries in Africa. These countries included the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Gambia, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somaliland, South Africa, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe. It is noted that although they all share -- implicitly or not -- a genuine commitment to making Africa grow and develop, they have a very different understanding of what should be done to ensure the achievement of this objective. Some believe that Africa needs better public health, while others believe that more should be done for children. Some believe that Africa's development should go hand in hand with the preservation of traditional knowledge, while others believe that it should be coupled with the protection of the environment. But despite the different perspectives that emerge from the 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 civilization can hardly be overestimated. African problems need African solutions and these solutions will have to emerge from the young leaders and will have to be informed by African culture. President Macron, the President of France, has repeatedly remarked that Africa's main problem has to do with civilization. The remark is unacceptable and doubtful because African civilization is not the problem but a source of solutions for the problems that the continent is facing.

Important as African culture may be, Bekenova's book has another -- and possibly more important -- message: Africa has many talented young leaders in different fields. These 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, identify and implement efficient solution, and create conditions for Africa's successful development. The voices *In Their Own Voices* speak as one voice: the voice of hope.

The book is interesting for different types of readers. It is a narrative that has a precious source of information, and qualitative scholars may find it quite useful. Political scientists may appreciate the fact that many African countries have so many emerging leaders forging the way in many different sectors.

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As a researcher, however, I find the book more interesting for the questions that it raises than the answers it provides. It would be, for example, very interesting to know what has happened to these young and emerging leaders and their respective initiatives. Leadership is important, but more so is sustainability; and while *In Their Own Voices* gives some insight into the former, we need new researches to provide more insights into the latter.

References

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