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New Approaches To Development

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By Moeen A. Qureshi

Some developing countries have substantially reduced poverty within their borders, and virtually all countries have at least made gains in education and health for poor people. But the 1980s have been a terribly difficult decade for the developing world, and tens of millions of poor people have grown poorer.

Adverse conditions in the global economy have slowed growth in even the most dynamic, well-managed economies. Weaker and less efficient economies went into a tailspin. Economic growth, by itself, is no guarantee of progress against poverty, but economic decline such as most of Africa and Latin America have seen spells suffering all around, for poor people most of all.

At the same time, lessons have been coming in from past efforts to reduce poverty. In reviewing the World Bank's experience with direct efforts to reduce poverty since the mid-1970s, we conclude that the bank's basic strategies have been sound. Small-scale agriculture is indeed the front line of the fight against rural poverty. Investments in human resources — in health, literacy, in managing population growth — yield high returns. And approaches we advocated are helping many countries to cope with urbanization.

If we are to succeed in overcoming mass poverty, three fundamental changes are needed.

The first — and responsibility here lies primarily with the developed countries — is to make the global economic climate once again right for sustainable development.

Second, the developing countries must pursue economic policies that encourage economic growth and progress against poverty. This decade's distress has exposed serious inefficiencies in the developing countries. As they work to recover from crisis, many countries are mounting systematic attacks on price distortions, bloated public sector spending and other

impediments to development. Increasingly, these adjustment efforts include measures to protect the efforts of poor people to meet their basic needs.

The third necessary change is to make programs which are supposed to help the poor become more effective.

All three of these changes call for fresh commitment and creative approaches, including new forms of partnership between governmental institutions and the vigorous legions of nongovernmental organizations, NGOs.

To eliminate mass poverty, we will need supportive policies in the industrial countries.

In recent years, NGOs have been multiplying and expanding. In many developing countries, the poor themselves are better organized now than they were 15 years ago.

In neighborhood associations, women's groups, religious groups, environmental organizations, farmers' organizations and cooperatives, women and men have joined hands to shape their own futures. Growing networks of regional and national NGOs bring the strength of numbers to these grassroots groups. Confederations of the local groups, national voluntary organizations and think tanks on social issues are mobilizing new resolve and imagination.

As of 1985, NGOs based in the industrial countries transferred an estimated \$4.4 billion a year to the developing countries. Despite their impressive growth, NGOs still reach only a fraction of the world's poor people.

But a number of developing-country governments are showing increased interest in NGOs. Where governments are

maintaining past levels of expenditure on poverty programs, some want to channel the resources through NGOs to enhance cost-effectiveness.

Some NGOs in the developing countries are strengthening their capacity to analyze issues of economic policy and to speak for the poor in public debate. And the resurgence of democracy in parts of the developing world has made some governments more responsive.

In our age of interdependence and rapid information exchanges, international NGO networks that were forged to channel assistance to developing nations are beginning to channel information back to the industrial countries. The insights carried on these people-to-people links bring grassroots experience to the public at large and to decision makers who often need such alternative, open channels.

Supportive Policies

To eliminate mass poverty, we will need supportive policies in the industrial countries. These will necessarily include substantial programs of official finance. But people in the industrial countries will not support such programs if NGOs they trust — church or environmental groups, for example — tell them that official development efforts are hopelessly ineffective or sometimes even harmful to the poor.

And if NGOs collaborate with official agencies to improve the quality of aid, I suspect that NGOs will also learn in the process. They may become more candid about their limitations, more appreciative of the importance and difficulty of what developing-country governments do and more knowledgeable about international trade and finance.

There will be points of controversy between intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, but we should be able to speak with less discord on certain basic issues of international policy.

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Renewed progress against poverty depends on sensitive and successful adjustment programs in the developing countries. NGOs at the grassroots are dealing first-hand with some of the low-income families who have lost jobs or government services due to economic malfunction at the global and national levels.

Some NGOs can give policymakers important insights about the effect adjustment policies have on poor people and suggest alternatives. When a government wants NGOs to help implement social components of an adjustment program, such economic policy discussions become especially important.

NGOs which grapple with adjustment issues may come to recognize that many of the policy reforms that are important for economic efficiency also serve the cause of equity. Price discrimination against agriculture did not come about by change; it serves the interests of relatively well-off urban groups at the expense of less powerful, poorer rural areas. Wasteful parastatal companies have gone uncurbed, partly because they provide jobs to thousands of politically influential city dwellers.

It is often such relatively well-off people who protest most vocally against adjustment measures. As NGOs deepen their engagement on broad issues of economic policy, they could help to reduce the bias against the poor which has often been built into pricing policy, tax policy and patterns of public expenditure.

In order to renew progress against poverty, we need to make public programs that promise to benefit the poor actually deliver. □

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However, as indicated earlier, at world market prices, Africa's most competitive export crops are not necessarily those that bring the most lucrative financial returns. Even if African countries were to practice more free trade, they will continue to face barriers to trade in the markets of the developed countries. Further, they would face an increased vulnerability to fluctuations in commodity prices, and the market power of agribusiness and transnational corporations.

At one level, the debate between the need to export more crops vis-a-vis domestic food self-sufficiency can be considered a spurious one. The proceeds from exports provide the foreign exchange needed to pay for imported oil and other commodities that are used in the production process or provide basic amenities such as electricity. At the same time, food output must be expanded wherever possible, and on a massive scale. This requirement is related to the nature of the development challenge itself. First, for the majority of Africans, food production is a means of income, employment, and other entitlements. Second, the relative price of food depends on its supply, and when output declines, prices would be higher. Third, a direct role of increasing aggregate food output is related to the fact that, given inefficiencies and uncertainties of the market mechanism, vulnerable groups, especially in rural areas, may find it safer to grow their own food than depend on income from other sources.

Finally, many African governments have recognized the need for policy reforms. At the behest of international agencies, they have raised producer prices and investment incentives for small farmers, reduced subsidies, cut public expenditures, devalued their currencies, and taken steps to encourage the private sector through "privatization." Not only are these measures controversial, but their implementation involves severe social costs and formidable political risks. While it is too early to judge whether their medium and long-term impact will be favorable, the social and political costs have resulted in resistance against further reforms of this nature. □

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THE ARTS

BOOKS

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Twenty-five Black African Filmmakers:

A Critical Study, With Filmography and Bio- Bibliography

By Françoise Pfaff, Greenwood Press,
Westport, Ct., 332 pp.

Reviewed by Abdulkadir N. Said

At a book reception for Françoise Pfaff's new book on African filmmakers, one of her subjects walked into the hall at the Martin Luther King Memorial Library in Washington, D.C. without fanfare. Some of the guests did not recognize Souleymane Cissé, from Mali, but the few who did showered him with adulation for his masterful contribution to the cinema of Africa. This scene illustrates the place of African films in the United States. They are appreciated by a select group of loyal viewers at college campuses and in the community but have yet to achieve wide commercial appeal or general distribution.

Cissé's latest work, "Yeelen" (The Light), captivated viewers when it was shown in Washington in April as part of the Second Washington, D.C. International Film Festival — Filmfest/DC. The 105-minute prize-winning film, which many critics have described as a "masterpiece," is the story of family conflict and supernatural powers, based on traditional beliefs of the Bambara people of West Africa.

"Yeelen," in my assessment, is a film that is artistically enriching, culturally correct and technically excellent. It is likely to play again in the United States. Go see it when that happens.

The timing for the release of Pfaff's new book, *Twenty-five Black African Filmmakers*, coincided, perhaps by thoughtful scheduling, with Filmfest/DC, which brought to the city a number of filmmakers from Africa (and elsewhere) whose works were featured in April and May.

Twenty-five is the second book on African cinema by Pfaff, who teaches French at Howard University and has written extensively on the subject. Her first book, *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene, A Pioneer of African Film*, was published



Pfaff



Cissé

in 1984, also by Greenwood Press.

This new volume is a logical extension of Pfaff's research on African cinema and her earlier work on Senegal's Sembene, one of the continent's most prominent filmmakers.

"Ousmane Sembene is presently considered by literary and film critics alike as one of Africa's most prolific contemporary creators," Pfaff writes in *Twenty-five*.

Twenty-five Black African Filmmakers, in a way, is a guide, a road map if you will, to the creative offerings of a select group of filmmakers — 23 male and 2 female from 13 countries whose films have earned international exposure. Entries include eight filmmakers from Senegal — including Sembene, of course — and Safi Faye, whom Pfaff describes as "the only active" and "African-born" female independent filmmaker on the continent at the present time; four from Ivory Coast; two each from Cameroon and Niger; one each from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria and South Africa.

The 13th entry is credited to France/Guadeloupe, by virtue of the filmmaker being of distant African descent who now works and lives in Africa. She is Sarah Maldoror, the second female featured in the book.

According to the author, Maldoror, in the late '50s, became "actively involved in the struggle for African liberation" at a time when "many African militants were exiled in Paris. Among them was the Angolan writer Mario de Andrade, one of the leaders of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) whose life Maldoror was to share for a number of years. It is with him that she subsequently went to Guinea-Conakry, where she came to realize that in Africa cinema was the most appropriate medium that could be used to raise the political awareness of the masses of people, many of whom were

and still are illiterate."

"Of African descent, Sarah Maldoror (her real name is Sarah Ducados; she chose the name Maldoror after reading *Les Chants de Maldoror* by the nineteenth-century French writer Count de Lautréamont) was born in 1929 in a small town in southern France of a West Indian father (from Guadeloupe) and a French mother," elaborates the author but neglects to tell us the significance — or reason — for the name change.

Another anomaly in Pfaff's work is in the main title. That is not to suggest that the title is bad, but the appendage "black" with African, which she uses in the title and in parts of her narrative, in my opinion, is superfluous. What else can a true African be? It is as odd as saying "white" European. Given the fact that national identities, ethnic dissimilarities, language differences and geographical lines do cut across the continent, all individuals with indigenous African ancestry need no appendage, in my opinion. The reverse would be true, for example, when identifying "white" South Africans or others with non-indigenous African ancestral lineage.

The author's preoccupation with clan affiliation, religious orientation and marital arrangements (polygamy in this case) is puzzling, even frivolous in my opinion.

The practice of polygamy in the traditional African/Islamic setting is as acceptable as monogamy is in the West. Pfaff's oversimplified characterization of this lifestyle — devoid of analysis, elaboration or explanation based in the African/Islamic context — could lead to a misreading or even ridicule by those unfamiliar with the culture. Besides, it has no relevance to filmmaking. In her zeal to incorporate every minute detail of her subjects' intimate family histories, she gets a bit overboard.

Consider these entries for Niger's Moustapha Alassane, Ghana's Kwaw



Maldoror



Gerima

Ansah and Senegal's Safi Faye:

□ Born around 1942 in N'Jougou, a village located in Benin, he is of Yoruba origin and Muslim extraction. The son of a polygamous tradesman, Alassane migrated to Niger in 1953.

□ Kwaw Painsil Ansah was born on 17 July 1941 in Agona Swedru, Ghana. The son of an educated photographer married to three wives, Ansah has three sisters and two brothers.

□ Born into the household of a polygamous village chief and businessman, Faye is the second of her mother's seven children and has thirteen half brothers and sisters as well.

While Pfaff's book contains a wealth of information relevant to African cinema, the three illustrations above mirror what readers also can expect.

A chapter is devoted to each of the 25 filmmakers, with every entry containing biographical and "filmographical" information, as well as a thematic analysis of the filmmaker's works, a survey of criticism and a bibliography.

Beyond a brief but crisply written introduction in which Pfaff provides important historical data on the evolution of the African cinema, this book appears to have been put together from resumes or written questionnaires. The text, which could have used tighter editing, contains useful information for film students, scholars and researchers, but at times is short on luster. But again, the value of works of this genre is in the wealth of information they contain.

Overall, the book is an excellent source for those interested in the development and the future of African cinema, as well as the personalities behind the creative processes and the politics of cinema in Africa.

Pfaff is correct, I believe, in her assessment of African cinema. "From its inception," (in the early '60s), she writes in the introduction, "Black African cinema has been largely envisioned as a functional art form. While redefining the portrayal of Africa on film, Black African filmmakers vehemently rejected alien stereotypes in favor of realistic images of Africa from an African perspective."

The key element here, as I see it, is the "African perspective" — meaning films that depict true African values; films that don't trivialize the African culture or identity; films that teach as well as inform and entertain.

Cinema, as seen through the lens of the African filmmaker, is a medium that can be used for positive purposes — such as enriching the human psyche — or for negative purposes — such as the glorification of corrupting values. It is up to the filmmaker to make the choice.

Witness, if you will, the depiction of Africa (and indeed the Afro-American experience in this country) in films originating from the West. The Tarzan syndrome of yesteryear, with its jungle culture and the debasement of African values and the African personality, and the Black exploitation genre of the '70s, which glorified drugs, violence and the pimp lifestyle, are graphic negative examples that still remain with us.

African cinema, through the works of filmmakers such as Sembene, Cissé and Haile Gerima of Ethiopia, among others, is charting its own course and moving in a different direction — ostensibly for the better.

"For years," notes Pfaff in her book, "superficial and grossly distorted portrayals of Africa on the silver screen had mirrored the general paternalistic and contemptuous colonial ideology that regarded Africans as inferior beings seemingly 'predestined' to peace and



Sembene



Faye

progress through European 'salvation.' Many European and American motion pictures set in Africa had resulted from such a racially biased outlook — one has only to mention the numerous escapist safari-melodramas manufactured on Hollywood's assembly lines since the turn of the century. In these alluring films, the African continent was but a mysterious, wild, exotic backdrop to the valiant deeds of Western adventurers and explorers. As expected, the bravery of these protagonists contrasted sharply with the blithe and 'uncivilized' simple-mindedness or cruel savagery of the natives, viewed in an unchanging and global perspective of lush landscapes and wild animals."

Africa has no Hollywood — famous for big bucks and enormous profits. African cinema can ill afford to become captive to what Pfaff aptly describes in her book as the assembly line mentality.

African cinema, as filmmaker Haile Gerima described it a few months ago at a Filmfest/DC symposium at Howard University where he teaches, is "hungry cinema." "It is not a privileged item; it is a begging cinema." It must beg for financial support to meet production costs from state agencies and through grants, for example.

Indeed, African cinema, for the most part, came into being as the malnourished offspring of a few adventurous individual filmmakers who are adept at mustering the resources necessary to bring their movie projects to fruition, no matter the length of the journey.

African cinema is young and lean; it has reluctantly accepted official sponsorship to move forward — only to be held back by official censorship when it portrays harsh historical or contemporary realities. A point in Pfaff's book illustrates this predicament. In the chapter on Gerima, creator of the highly political film, "Harvest: 3,000 Years," she writes:

"'Harvest: 3,000 Years' was filmed in two weeks, but it took Gerima more than a year to edit it in the United States. Shot in 16mm, the motion picture was blown into 35mm so as to fit the criteria of Ethiopian movie houses. Yet this film, primarily intended for Ethiopian audiences,

African cinema is young and lean; it has reluctantly accepted official sponsorship to move forward — only to be held back by official censorship . . .

has to this day never been shown in that country."

"'Harvest' was filmed on location in 1974 at a period of political instability in Ethiopia, at a modest cost of \$20,000, all of which was financed by Gerima's own funds." It was an inauspicious time to shoot a movie that depicted centuries of exploitation of Ethiopian peasants by wealthy landlords. Could the filming have been done at another time?

"This was the only short period of time in Ethiopia in which the film could be made," Gerima is quoted in Pfaff's book, from an interview which appeared in the spring 1978 *Framework*. "A month earlier, the bureaucrats of Haile Selassie would have stopped the film or forbidden the shooting. A month later, after the military had consolidated its power, things would

have been crippled as well . . ."

Pfaff's book contains such interesting vignettes on the hardships, challenges and rewards of the film world in Africa — a continent fraught with fears, suspicions, political uncertainties, unresolved past and present conflicts.

Because of the visual impact of movies and the audience responses they are capable of generating, cinema, indeed, is a viable but costly form of art for public enlightenment in Africa and elsewhere.

In *Twenty-five*, Françoise Pfaff has compiled certain valuable insights and presented certain truths through the views of two dozen — plus one — creative filmmakers. This is only the beginning. More is expected in the years to come. □

The reviewer is editor of New Directions magazine.