

High-speed rail system would mean a renaissance for Africa

by A.A.A. Sakho

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How is it that some countries are highly developed and others little or not at all? Several answers are possible, depending on whether the country in question is African or not.

From any standpoint, building an economically and politically viable state is no easy task, be it in Africa or elsewhere. Indeed, 160 nations are members of the United Nations Organization, but only one-tenth of them are considered highly developed. It is precisely that one-tenth that dominates and controls international trade.

There are many reasons for Africa's economic backwardness. The price of raw materials is not the one and only cause. In Europe as well, certain products or economic sectors are often subject to the ups and downs of the international market, that is both African and non-African products are. . . . In fact, we Africans should begin by recognizing our shortcomings and making up for them. Let us limit ourselves to the following observations which are patently obvious: Until now, we have failed to grasp the African *fact* and its immense economic possibilities; there is an almost total absence of organization of our whole society.

Every African state is rather open to the outside world and often closed to neighboring countries. This situation has led us to witness conflicts that would have been unimaginable some decades ago—I mean Africans expelling other Africans from their country. So our efforts, our wealth, our experiences are not added up together, but are subtracted from one another. In such conditions, we have nothing but poverty to share! This is true from north to south and from east to west, even though the first and foremost precondition should have been to organize a vast, continent-wide solidarity, in order to raise the population's living standard. On the whole continent, the living standard is in a spiraling decline.

The situation is so dramatic that one wonders where our dear continent will end up. Our pride is deeply wounded

when we see our youth flee the continent, to immigrate to developed countries in the hope of finding a future there, but a future which can only be hypothetical. These days, developed countries are supersaturated in every sector and their problems are as great as their overdevelopment. In Paris, this is obvious in the immense housing problem. It is therefore more than urgent to bring Africa into a true economic renaissance, affording prosperity for the largest number. This is possible.

In short, we are faced with another question today. Are we or are we not going to recognize the failure of 30 years of independence and national management? Should we continue to blame only others, that is outside countries, for our collective errors? One needs a great deal of political courage to recognize one's own mistakes and to draw the obvious conclusions. It is time the Africans began respecting Africa, if Africa is to be respected by others. After all, what good is it to put on a blindfold in order to not face up to reality?

How other nations developed

Taking a good look at the world around us, who could deny the following truths:

- It is the French who built up France. Over centuries, they have made it into a country that attracts so many people. This does not, of course, mean that everything is perfect. But for many serious people, the French way of life, of culture, etc. is to be respected.

- Starting from a more than dramatic national situation, in every sector of its economy, Germany got back on its feet and rebuilt its economy, to such an extent as to become, within a few decades, one of the three greatest economic powers of the world. Germany is a model of industrial efficiency. . . .

- In the mid-1950s, Japan was an integral part of those countries considered underdeveloped. The yen was basically unknown throughout the world. In 30 years' time, the Japanese have become recognized throughout the world for the quality of their products and the stability of the yen. It is no exaggeration to say that Japan is one of the most prosperous countries in the world. Her prosperity is due to the quality of the work and the seriousness of the Japanese people.

During the same three decades, what have we Africans done? We have satisfied ourselves with consuming what is

consumable, but never creating anything ourselves! In spite of our fabulous natural resources, we remain a continent of the future, failing to see that whoever does not control his present cannot control his future. . . .

It was in order to control their respective futures that France, Germany, Japan, and other countries began, from the outset, to give themselves an infrastructure on a par with their present and future ambitions. We forgot to do that at the same time as they did. Therefore, African trade worthy of the name cannot exist. Without solid infrastructure in several complementary sectors, the economic miracle will remain wishful thinking.

For example, France plans to extend its high-speed train network to 400 kilometers between now and the end of the century. That's quite a lot, and only includes infrastructure; the economic repercussions will also be great. In the United States, for two centuries, the Port of New York created prosperity for the city and the entire New York region. That's right—for two centuries. The port is an element of infrastructure.

This type of vision of economic buildup over the medium and long terms is what has been so cruelly lacking in Africa. One of the reasons for the lack of long-term vision is the internal organization of African society. The organization is too dispersed, with no big urban centers comparable to large European metropolises. Even though progress has always come out of the big cities! Such a situation did exist before the colonial conquests. Lacking such massive population centers, we were not able to keep up and to master, at the same tempo as our European neighbors, the successive changes in modern science and technology that completely changed the economic values of the world. This is especially true in the transportation field.

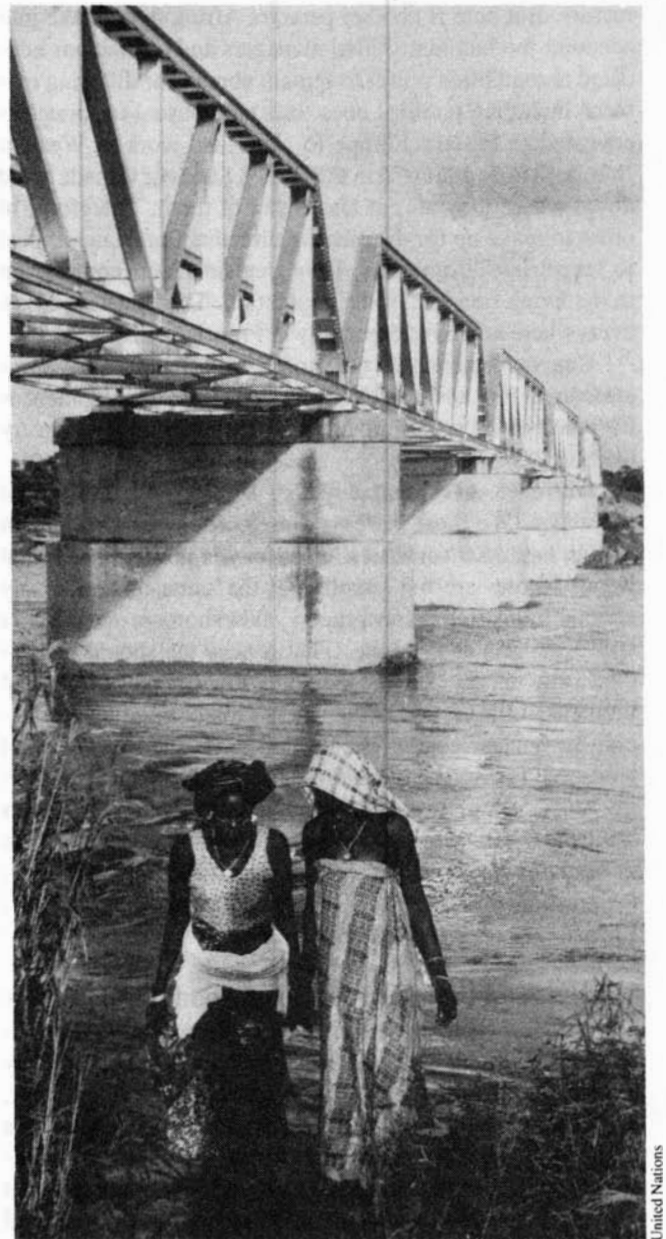
In this final decade of our century, we are experiencing the birth of new transportation technologies. They are nearly providential for such a vast continent as ours. This time, it is absolutely necessary for Africa to be a pioneer of those new technologies.

Once and for all, let us stop turning away from progress. Wherever it may come from, we should also strive to master this progress for the sake of the masses. . . .

Priorities for infrastructure

Since 1960, important plant and equipment have been built in Africa. But the result is that, 30 years later, these have nowhere allowed a lasting profitable economic takeoff. Otherwise, we would not be in a situation of such general bankruptcy. In many cases, unproductive and overvalued equipment has increased indebtedness. Some significant examples:

- A railway line whose construction should have cost \$140 million, was invoiced for about \$600 million—an overpricing of more than 400%.
- A hydraulic dam project was estimated at \$4 billion



A railroad bridge under construction in 1961 in Nigeria. Today, 30 years later, distances are still measured in "walking days."

although the real cost was not more than \$400 million—a whopping increase of 1,000%. This dam was never built.

● A 25-km urban transportation project was estimated at 7 billion francs (close to 300 million francs per km), although 700 million would have been more than enough. In such circumstances, infrastructure for Africa seem indeed prohibitive. That's not true. It is the method that must be changed, to make them less speculative.

Once the key is handed over, the plant still has to run and to pay back investments. This involves management, requiring highly competent managers, technicians, and di-

rectors. But here is another paradox Africa should take into account: the fact that skilled managers and technicians educated abroad often prefer to remain abroad for differing reasons, including political ones. It is not unusual for directors educated in Eastern Europe to come and work in Western Europe. Those educated in the United States or Canada settle down where they are, at least most of them. Therefore, in order to make up for the missing directors, our states appeal to “expatriate” Europeans. They are paid a lot in comparison to the living standard of the population. This situation exists everywhere and most especially in French-speaking Africa.

Can we establish an order of priority in choosing infrastructure? Yes and no. Coherent economic development is the result of the sum of many activities, from heavy industry to shopkeepers.

However, all economic sectors use electricity as a source of energy. We must increase our electricity production. In certain large African cities, electricity is now rationed; that is, all sectors are not supplied at the same time. For any serious industrialization process, this shortage would be a real economic catastrophe. That is why we should not exclude any energy source, including nuclear power. For the moment, Africa is one of the world’s major uranium producers. So nuclear energy should not be rejected as the West tends to do now. The technology for producing nuclear energy can develop, just as the security or ecology problems linked to it can. What is in any case clear in the present stage of our knowledge, is that without plentiful cheap electricity, there can be no TGV, no TGVA, no Transrapid, no maglev. Electrical energy is primary.

High-speed transportation of goods and people

With respect to passenger and goods transportation, Africa is incomparably behind. This deficiency is unquestionably the cause of the economic backwardness on our continent. The drama is that African leaders do not necessarily make a direct link between transportation and economic development. It is true that inter-African trade does not account for more than 2% of total African trade, although the total population is over 650 million, twice that of the European Community.

In developed countries, land, sea, and air transportation covers all economic sectors. Their complementary nature allows these countries to get their supplies from all over the world. European states took an interest in modes of transportation very early (before the rest of the world), especially because of the geographical disposition of Europe, the proximity of the sea. For example, as the crow flies, no point in Great Britain or on the Italian peninsula is more than 120 km from the sea. In Africa, it is more than 1,800 km. The development of the merchant marine came several centuries before surface and air transport.

If, per chance, all means of transportation in the developing sector were to suddenly stop functioning, these countries

would be totally ruined. In France, suffice it to consider what happened during May 1968! A general strike brought all transportation to a halt. The country was paralyzed for weeks. People were stocking food. It became impossible to find certain perishables. The shops, cut off from supplies, were sold out. If these events had lasted for one year, France would have been on the edge of famine. As with other services, gas stations were not supplied and cars and trucks were forced to stand still: The rare cars still moving were using gas bought on the black market at high prices. In that way, some clever folks became millionaires overnight. In May 1968, the “layman,” rich or poor, understood perfectly well the importance of transportation, in a country as advanced as France where all internal and external activities are linked like a chain.

But back to Africa. Even in our times, “deepest Africa” continues to reckon distances in terms of walking days, rather than in miles or kilometers. We say that City A is five walking days’ distance from City B, which means approximately 200 km. With the TGVA-Intercity running at 400 km per hour, those five days will be reduced to half an hour! So the TGVA compresses distances enormously, and that can create an unmistakable impulse for economic activity.

A state like Guinea, for example, which covers 250,000 square kilometers, because of the gain in time, would seem to cover only 25,000—that is, less than Belgium. This theoretical reduction of distances will be felt in human relations between Guineans themselves, as well as with neighboring countries; in the volume of national and international commerce; and in the ease and speed of distribution generally, and of food products in particular. On our continent (with the possible exception of South Africa), people living more than 50 km from the coast almost never consume fresh fish (excluding freshwater fish) at home. . . .

Conversely, for a great majority of countries bordering the Atlantic, the coastal area dwellers cannot consume fresh milk nationally produced.

In other words, all food which cannot be preserved over a long period of time is consumed where it is produced. In the hinterlands (except Nigeria), the population density is relatively low, which corresponds to the lack of ability for commercialization. We can see here one of the reasons for the lack of incentives for African agricultural producers.

Burying tons of rotting fruit

In Guinea, the production of oranges is very important, reaching several hundred thousand tons. But due to a lack of commercial circulation, nearly 90% of production is buried each year in great pits. This is to prevent the cattle from eating them and from having them rot on the ground. This “first class burial” is also used for mangoes, avocados, lemons, etc. If we Africans want to finally enter into the world of prosperity, we must be very critical of ourselves and recognize our lack of creative imagination. This lack of creative

imagination, centuries old, is largely responsible for our poverty, for the fruit we bury every year, since time immemorial, could be worth hundreds of millions of dollars on the international markets. Imagine what that would represent after 10, 20, 50 years of commercialization. This helps to understand why it is so urgent to develop the TGVA.

The TGVA will also allow a better organization of the educational system, which today touches only 20 to 30% of African youth. The pupil or student living 400 km from his school or university would only have one hour commuting time one way or the other. During his studies, this young person could live with his family.

With the TGVA, the medical sector is better developed. Doctors, specialists, professors will be able to travel rapidly to the rural areas. The patients will no longer have to go to the capital. Now, in many countries, only the capital has modern and sufficiently well-equipped hospital facilities. In general, specialists and professors stay in the capital. Indeed, traveling into the hinterland becomes a real adventure, because of the lack of appropriate means of transportation.

But if I had to cite all the advantages of the TGVA, the list would be far too long.

Overcoming isolation

I will conclude with the tremendous possibilities of overcoming isolation the TGVA affords. Take three examples: hinterland cities of a given country; border areas with neighboring states; totally landlocked countries, that is, those with no sea coast or short sea coasts, such as Zaire.

Africa has about 15 countries in this category, which cover more than 10 million square kilometers.

By contrast, Europe, excluding the U.S.S.R., has only four landlocked nations, of relatively small geographic size: Switzerland, Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The TGVA will bring the states farthest from the coast to within five hours' traveling time to the nearest coast. At present, these states only use air travel for intercontinental relations.

Overcoming this isolation will allow those states to make full use of their numerous raw materials and to become importing and exporting countries. After freeing a majority of cities, regions, and nations from isolation, state-to-state and continentwide trade worthy of the name can be developed. The consumers are already there. The African population is currently estimated at 650 million people. In 20 to 25 years, there will be more than 1 billion souls to feed, educate, dress, care for, transport, house, etc. This is no small challenge for development.

I thank the Schiller Institute and [its French spokesman] Jacques Cheminade for the interest they have taken in our continent at a time when those who owe their prosperity to Africa are fleeing there. They took what was good and easy to get. Now they tell us to manage by ourselves! It is a challenge. We must answer it.

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