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KasiNomic Revolution: The Rise of African Informal Economies

AUTHOR

GG Alcock

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A review of the book KASINOMIC REVOLUTION: The rise of African Informal Economies. Written by GG Alcock

Information on the author

GG Alcock is white and together with his brother, was raised in rural Msinga in KwaZulu Natal by activist parents who lived among the Zulu people. This was against the diabolic apartheid system which was ruling at the time. Consequently, his father was killed when GG was 14 years old. The family lived in a small mud hut beside the Tugela River without basic amenities. Like other boys in Msinga, GG spoke isiZulu and engaged in activities such as stick fighting, herding goats, and hunting birds in the bush and roasting them. Activities by the river introduced GG to business while helping locals cross the river using a ferry at a fare of 5 cents per person and an additional fee for luggage, such as a goat.

Later in life, GG hitch-hiked to Johannesburg, where he did odd jobs such as laying bricks. While in Johannesburg, his previous work includes but not limited to being a shebeen owner, servicing cars, political activist and community worker. GG's current roles and positions include author, founder of Minanawe Marketing, and speaker on various topics, e.g., entrepreneurship, the informal market, diversity and culture. The author is fluent in isiZulu, conversant in most South African languages and affectionately called *gamla* or *mlungu* (white person) by his peers.

Context and aim of the book

According to the author, this book "is a murmur in the streets, a grassroots economic rising which has grown organically despite government and business regulation, and which is the future of African economic activity"^{1:ixiii}. He is devoted and advocates for the informal economy in Africa. GG highlights how this sector is for an average person who works hard and needs support, not just handouts. He outlines the informal economy's significance and the practical support needed for its success and sustainability. The author also alludes to the legacy of apartheid in the South African context.

How the information is structured

The book has five main parts, each divided into short coherent subsections. These are outlined below. GG indicates awareness and understanding of African practices and traditions ranging from the food people eat, how they talk, diversity, realities, hardships, and values at the grassroots level. He uses his language skills and humour through anecdotes. Some of them are the dancing seller by the traffic lights (robot), the monkey who steals and smokes cigarettes, and the granny in the rural area who is transported to the grant pay-point using a wheelbarrow.

A summary of the main parts of the content

Part 1 KasiNomic Guerrillas

The author shares success stories of the “*unsung heroes of the KasiNomic Revolution*”^{1:4} in the informal economy. He indicates that although nuances may vary, these businesses are similar across Africa. GG urges the government to do more to regulate and offer support as these businesses contribute to the economy. Among other things, he outlines the informal economy businesses by focusing on costs and profits, business owners’ relationship with the law, working hours, number of dependants fed, inventory, business site, how they got into the business and the type of business. Some of the businesses he covers are The Kasi Greengrocer, which sells green peppers and cassava; Hardbody Chicken Dust, which sells home-reared or live chicken; and Golden Delicious, which sells *amagwinya* (a name for fat cakes in South Africa).

Part 2 KasiNomic Revolutionaries and Counter-revolutionaries

In part 2, GG focuses on visionaries with sound value propositions in the informal economy. He takes the reader from the energetic dancing South African traffic lights street seller, through Zambia’s *vitumbuwa* (a name for fat cakes in Zambia), east Africa’s (Kenya) *boda boda* (motorbike), Nigeria’s popular spicy snail soup to the Hello Paisa empire, which has offices in countries such as Malawi, Zimbabwe and the UK. GG describes multi-billion industries, such as the noodles in Nigeria and hairpieces, with reference to South Africa’s dark days of the hair pencil test to hair recently being more than a fashion statement. The author is pro the informal economy, keeping its unique local flavour and relevance while receiving the necessary support to thrive. Hence, he applauds some businesses in the formal sector for assisting the informal economy while he warns against cultural appropriation and formalising the informal sector.

Part 3 A Retail Revolution Guerrilla vs Gorilla

In this part, he focuses on spazas (tuckshops), which are shared across Africa, e.g., referred to as *semausu* in Botswana and *nthemba* in Zambia. In South Africa, they are led by the groups of Bangladeshis, Ethiopians, Pakistanis, and Somalis, who own the majority, 85%, of South Africa’s spaza shops. He highlights some of the sector’s dark side while clarifying misconceptions about immigrants, their logistics of getting to South Africa, their economic contributions and how some build businesses from hawking to wholesale. Beyond the government regulating the informal sector and collecting tax, he proposes Afrocentric practical funding models such as the one developed in Kenya. He also appeals to highly skilled immigrant retailers to teach skills to locals in the informal sector.

Part 4 The Rise of the Afripolitan

The author outlines how Africans modernise while staying rooted in cultural practices such as performing rituals. The concept of community is addressed while hinting at realities such as hardships between communities of the haves and have-nots, which can be traced back to the Group Areas Act of the apartheid government. Moreover, he highlights Africa’s uniqueness and that brands targeting these communities should have their finger on the pulse if they are to appeal to them.

Part 5 Africa Rising

GG focuses on economies and businesses that Africans are already engaging in.

He unpacks their value chain and reiterates that a better and more sustainable approach is needed to embrace African cultural practices in this modern day. Some businesses are *shisanyama*, *sphahlo*, veterinary, muti, goats, and property ranging from backroom rentals to building a house “*brick by brick*”^{1:208}. GG puts it into perspective when he shares the story of Omphemetse, who does not qualify for a home loan in the formal sector and uses the brick-by-brick strategy to build herself a decent house.

The author ends by saying, “I [GG] drive out, turning right at the new Shoprite, and the light blue board offers me ‘That home loan from the bank that says YES more often. How can we help you?’ I wonder what Omphemetse thinks when she sees that sign?”^{1:210}.

Conclusion

The author restates the need for Afrocentric systems, such as building modern villages to accommodate Africa’s uniqueness. He condemns the practices of marginalising the informal economy as it contributes to countries’ Gross Domestic Production (GDP). GG alludes to the fact that jobs are now beyond the conventional “8 to 5 job with a payslip”^{1:242} and that communities of ordinary people should not be treated as “breeding grounds for employees”^{1:241}. Moreover, he highlights that the colonial and Western systems are unjust to the masses in developing countries. Africa needs no “*bicycle lanes but hawker lanes*”^{1:241} where they can trade closer to their clientele without fear of municipalities chasing them.

Relevance of the book

To Africa

Africans’ rejection of the encroaching imperial, colonial and Western ways predates the 1884-1885 Berlin conference, which constituted invading Africa. In various spaces, Africans such as Professor PLO Lumumba, Dr Chika Onyeani and Mr Julius Malema still reject these ways and agree that Africans should be producing more and not consuming exports that are not contextually relevant.

Academics support the idea of contextually relevant knowledge, evident in their discourse and deployment of words and phrases such as Afrocentric, decolonising, reconfiguration, rearticulation, reimagining and transformation. Ramugondo’s (2015) work on occupational consciousness² and her 2018 World Federation for Occupational Therapy (WFOT) opening keynote speaker speech³ puts the above into perspective. GG’s book is exemplary and narrates realities in Africa, insinuating that there should not be a plug-in-and-play of imported content for Africa.

To Occupational Therapy

The occupational therapy profession is 81 years old in Africa⁴, with thousands of registered therapists, professors included, but its pedagogy seems to remain Western and colonial. For instance, prescribed and recommended classroom content such as textbooks, standardised assessments, practice frameworks, and models are not near advocating African realities. The paucity of level 1 research⁵ will maintain, if not perpetuate, the colonial status quo.

GG's book, a gift to the profession, demonstrates a fertile ground for level 1 research. Colleagues, especially those doing community work and/or vocational rehabilitation, are invited to peruse the book's case studies in parts 1 and 5, respectively, and to find creative ways to share these with, e.g., students. These can add to the occupational therapy convenient intervention sessions such as face-washing and Morabaraba games.

GG's solution-driven work shows his allegiance to Africa, and it is inspirational. On the other hand, people like Rick Ross, a serial entrepreneur and an artist, get inspired by small to grand work⁵ ³min. I can relate to the above as I draw inspiration from basic to iconic deeds. For instance, I could get inspired from:

- ✓ the freelancer who, at times a) assists with grocery bags, b) poses as a car guard in a reflective jacket or, c) self-appoints to wash people's cars without their permission whatsoever. His pay ranges from a hand-to-mouth-gesture, a sign of asking for food or a nomayini, signifying anything you have on you;
- ✓ Malusi Langa who packaged his PhD work into a book⁷;
- ✓ a fully-fledged professor securing a multimillion grant for a sizable project divided between key role players ranging from international colleagues in academia to clinicians and community-based workers on the ground; to
- ✓ the resistance against the omnipresence of slavery by Queen Njinga Ana de Sousa Mbande of the Kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba (now Angola).

A common thread from the aforementioned is bringing thoughts to life. In Sepulana, my home language, we say: *mmereko o tšhaba matsogo* "put in the work"; *sethogo se baba mongwayi*, "scratch your own itch", i.e., something occupational therapy in Africa could benefit from.

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