



I Transact, Therefore I Am: A Case for the Humble Marketplace

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At the risk of bringing the wrath of philosophers upon me, I wish to borrow from the famous maxim *cogito ergo sum* by French philosopher Rene Descartes - which translates to *I think, therefore I am* - to define present humankind: *I transact, therefore I am*. This is no way a reification of consumerism, or a deification of capitalism, and how the market has become definitive of our era; it comes from a deep observation of the single thing that defines us humans today: markets and trade transactions.

Modern civilization is premised on structures and systems that make trading and legal transaction possible. There is no community that does not have markets and that does not have market systems for legal transactions. All communities frown upon any exchange that is not transactional; that is simply called theft.

Though humans have preferred to distinguish themselves from other animals on the basis of their rationality, what really defines us is interdependence - the realisation that we need each other in order to survive, and that we basically cannot do without one another. This common human need for the other transcends the individual to communities and embraces entire nations. Even the most individualistic eccentric, with delusions of self-sufficiency, quickly realises the mutual need humans have for each other, and the primacy of structures for transaction. Nations maintain diplomatic relationships on this principle, and despite the dominance nature of the global powers, forums, such

as the United Nations General Assembly, are ideally supposed to be an equitable marketplace of ideas where both the powerful and the not so powerful, the wealthy and the financial minions exchange and interact. The most basic transactional platform is the marketplace.

A while ago, while pondering this piece, I sought opinions from several professionals. I needed them to reflect on the state of markets in Kenya. Each one, without exception, responded by focusing on the financial, stock and commodities markets. My interlocutors were not all economists or engaged in the financial sector; in fact few were, and this is the poignant point.

In the psyche of most people, the “market” is conflated to mean local and international stock, bond, securities, forex and derivatives markets. Few think outside this frame and the managers of our economy are guiltiest on this score. It is not surprising that there was a look of utter surprise when I revealed that the market I was interested in was the *kawaida* or ordinary market - the *soko, chiro, ndunyu* that is the massive open air market teeming with *kawaida* people in Karatina, Kongowea, Gikomba, Muthurwa, Toi, Kapsoit, Luanda, Kibuye and many other places. The livestock markets in Suswa, Koriema, Lubao and Kibokoni that specialise in cattle, goats, dogs and fish, respectively, and the MwembeTayari, SokoMjinga, SokoMoi, Marigiti, Mbero and Rongai markets that have acres and acres of farm produce strewn all over, usually displaying the most unhygienic handling. Even Village Market, Maasai Market, or Kariakor that specialise in curios or material culture, but which are basically outlets for tourists to purchase memorabilia and trinkets, and which hardly provide a forum for engagement with our rich material culture.

Once the surprise faded off their faces, each one was challenged to ponder why it is that the *kawaida* (ordinary) markets were rendered invisible in discourses around GDP, economic performance and human resource deployment, whereas there were millions of individuals directly or indirectly engaged in markets as traders, service providers and clients. Why is the ordinary market, with the potential to provide the impetus for innovation that would provide much-needed employment for the youth, totally ignored?

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The challenge extended to questioning why the resilience of the *kawaida* markets to sustain the social and economic well-being of communities is not factored in our economic growth models. Why is it that though the monies that circulate within *kawaida* markets is significant there does not seem to be a fair estimation of it in our economic projections?

I was also most intrigued by the human interaction and the resultant social and cultural dynamics evolving around markets, but found scanty studies on the phenomenon. I further pushed my respondents to think of the reasons that led to the waning in prominence of markets that in the past were important meeting points for communities and their commodities. Today these markets have become totally eclipsed by virtual markets that serve the interests of a minority. Corollary to this is what is lost when these interactions fizzle out. Markets must have created social cohesion premised on co-dependence. Language and common practices evolved to ensure the harmony upon which markets thrived. The intercultural interactions gave rise to multicultural creative and expressive forms.

Angela Ka-yee Leung et.al, in a study published in *American Psychologist*, empirically demonstrate that exposure to multiple cultures in and of itself enhances creativity. They argue that the

extensiveness of multicultural experiences greatly enhances creative performance, as well as the creativity supporting cognitive processes that make an individual more creatively versatile. Cross-cultural exposure, such as what *kawaida* markets provided, increased the capacity for creativity, invention and innovation.

A confluence of needs and cultures

The centrality of markets in African life can be appreciated from the mention of markets in African literature and even in songs. Activities on designated market day, and at the market are pointers to such significance as proverbs like *“Every marketplace has its own madman”* denote. Any authentic work of African fiction invariably has a market scene. The marketplace facilitated more than simple economic engagement; it allowed people from diverse communities to interact and exchange. In exogamous communities, market day was an opportunity to forge future romantic relationships. It could be argued that the marketplace was the dating sites that pre-dated the digital era.

Actual markets, in contrast to virtual ones, are physical spaces that evolve to enable transactions between buyers and sellers. There is a confluence of needs: the needs of a seller with commodities to dispose of, and the needs of a buyer who lacks the commodity on sale. Each is driven to the market by their needs. The existence of markets underscores a reality that no individual, community or region is self-sufficient and therefore must transact. A description of the evolution of Dagoretti in Nairobi as a significant meeting point between Kikuyu farmers and the pastoralist Maasai shows how markets fostered both co-existence and rivalry: “19th century Dagoretti was part of the rich food-producing Kikuyu country and was populated with Maasai and Kikuyu people as it lay on the edge of Maasai country. Kikuyu farmed sugarcane and banana among other crops, while Maasai kept cattle. The two groups cohabited and their lives together ebbed between trade and raid.”

“Ebbed between trade and raid” meant that even as they had a transactional relationship, there were times when they would raid each other. This notwithstanding, there was still a strong relationship between the two communities that allowed for social interaction and cross-cultural mingling.

Kisumu, the third-largest city in Kenya, evolved from a marketplace as the Kisuma name suggests. Sumo is a food security strategy practiced by the Luo where regions that have not enjoyed a good harvest would visit relatives in food-secure regions to borrow grain. In subsequent seasons, the favour would be returned.

The knowledge that those with bumper harvests today might face hardship in the next season entrenched the interdependence. What is today Kisumu was a central place that allowed for transactions between different communities around Winam Gulf all the way to the hills of Nyangóri to Nandi Hills and the present day Kericho. Many towns in Kenya have evolved from such humble transactional markets.

On market days, communities were brought together and even hostile neighbours managed a truce to allow for transaction. An important aspect of these transactions is that there arose between the traders an in-between population and language. Languages of commerce also emerged and these elements of culture ensured that there was social cohesion, if not total harmony.

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The para-linguistic nature of the communication between neighbouring communities would be a fascinating area of intercultural studies. Picture a conversation at the Lubao market in Western Kenya between a dog seller and a dog buyer. What attributes of the canine would the seller extoll in order to secure a deal? Each context is unique. For instance, a goat seller in Koriema in Baringo or Kiamaiko in Nairobi, or a cow seller in Suswa, or even a fishmonger and the buyer at Jubilee Market in Kisumu wishing to purchase a specific species of fish develop their own transactional language.

In many Kenyan livestock markets, there is a distinct bargaining method used to arrive at consensus on a price. The seller and the buyer shake hands while mentioning a price and as long as the price is not agreed upon, the hand is let go. This is repeated several times as the two parties haggle to reach a middle point, and once the negotiated price is mutually arrived at, the handshake is held; a deal has been arrived at. Only after this does money and the livestock change hands.

What is demonstrated by this shared common culture and the rules of engagement are two subtle messages: that the parties are equal and that the transaction is negotiated to the satisfaction of both parties. No one leaves the deal feeling like they have been shafted. This is important because social cohesion must be maintained even after the deal is done. This is a far cry from the skulduggery that defines trade outside of the *kawaida* market where kickbacks, price-fixing, price variation and other unscrupulous practices are the nature of the transactions.

The existence of markets underscores the centrality of equality between the two transacting parties. Both parties must be willing to acknowledge a “deficiency” – something they lack which the other party has. The transaction only works because the buyer has something of value which they offer to the seller in exchange for the desired product. The transaction is only successful if there is a mutual agreement on the equivalence in value of the transacted items. There is an inherent danger if the parties have no consensus on the value of the transacted items.

Another factor of the market is that the interaction between the parties must be premised on a malleability – a willingness to evolve new identities, characteristics and behaviours. No one leaves a market in the same state as they entered it. Since it is a platform for exchange, markets therefore exist on the principle of fairness – both parties in the transaction must agree that the exchange satisfies their notion of equivalent value. In order to arrive at this mutuality and symbiotic co-existence there must be ways in which cooperation and understanding is built and maintained between the two parties. There are shared values that arise from the familiarity between the sellers and the buyers. This cordial relationship promote an ethic of quality products and honest exchange.

Markets are, therefore, an indicator of whether an economy is productive, or has been rendered purely consumer-oriented and parasitic. Whereas the stock, bond, securities, forex and derivatives markets might not reveal the underlying inequalities, the *kawaida* markets cannot hide the extent of symbiotic co-existence between parties.

Goods available on the market is indicative of what a region produces and consumes, and this balance or imbalance immediately exposes the power dynamics between these communities, nations or regions. The *kawaida* market is the platform where local contextual everyday problems find solutions. Whether the challenges emerge from energy, water, food security, health or climate, the solutions can only be invented, innovated and made available at the local *kawaida* market. The local stock exchange will not be able to reflect and respond if a community is facing an energy crisis and the locals cannot boil their *githeri* or fry their *mbuta*. Neither will the forex market respond to a water crisis where women have to travel miles to get the precious liquid for their families. Nor can the bond market respond to the food security that might threaten a region when army worms have invaded their maize farms. The securities market cannot respond to the health challenges caused by malaria. The need to develop innovative solutions actually rests in the *kawaida* market.

***Kawaida* markets as hubs for innovation**

William Kamkwamba's story has been immortalised in a film titled *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. In 2001, Malawi, his home country, was facing a terrible drought, and the subsequent famine was made worse by abject poverty. Imported maize from Tanzania was highly-priced and the desperate locals could not afford their staple *nsima*. Disaster was imminent.

William, 14 years old at that point, was meant to transition to high school, but his family could not afford school fees and he had to drop out of school. The farming community he hailed from faced a series of combined problems: poverty, food insecurity, unpredictable climate and erratic rain patterns, poor educational infrastructure and unsustainable eco-unfriendly energy.

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Driven by the desire to solve his community's problems, William, inspired by diagrams in a Physics textbook in the local library where he sought refuge after dropping out of school, sought to build a windmill that could generate electricity that could be used for pumping water for irrigation of their farms and also provide lighting and charge mobile phones that a few in their community-owned. Once he built his windmill from discarded scraps from a junkyard, and managed to generate enough electricity to power his family's radio and a few light bulbs, it can be said, the rest is history. His innovation was scaled up and a water pumping windmill was built that could enable irrigation as well as light up the village, the local school and provide a model for others to copy throughout Malawi. William went on to recruit many other young Malawians into building windmills to solve the problem of lack of sustainable energy, reliance on rain-fed agriculture and resultant poverty.

A few years ago, at the height of the Hyacinth menace in Lake Victoria, Kisumu Innovation Centre (KICK) came into the picture by innovatively using hyacinth to produce paper, ropes and other materials with the weed. The moment of glory for their innovations came during the memorial service for the late Nobel laureate Prof. Wangari Maathai when it was revealed that the unique casket in which her body lay was manufactured by KICK from hyacinth. It is in this eco-friendly casket that she was cremated. The young men and women at KICK responded to the local problems of youth unemployment, environmental degradation, and poor garbage disposal by promoting the recycling and re-use of waste to create environmental sustainability.

Prof. Wangari's decision to opt for cremation, and to cap it off in a hyacinth casket, showcased two levels of innovative thinking: it made the point that trees need not be cut down to build coffins, and it also challenged people to adopt more environmentally-friendly body disposal methods using eco-friendly solutions. When one thinks of the number of trees felled just to build caskets, which are used just for a short while before ending up being buried in concrete vaults, the hyacinth casket is nothing short of genius.

There are 4.4 million disabled people in Kenya and 67 per cent of these are unemployed and living in poverty. For those who cannot afford basic wheelchairs, their movement is restricted and some end up wasting away. A young Lincoln Wamae decided to tackle this challenge by making electric wheelchairs. He collects most of the parts from junkyards and assembles the motorable wheelchairs. He says that he began his innovations as a hobby and it has now evolved into a thriving business. He obtains the batteries from old discarded laptops and by so doing is actually contributing to solving

the problem of e-waste. His lithium-iron powered wheelchairs have made these life-changing gadgets available to those who would only have dreamt of them.

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The same can be said of Simon Karumbo who has made a 100 per cent solar-powered vehicle. He responded to the challenge of youth unemployment as well as climate change and energy challenge by innovating on energy-saving solutions. He controversially went ahead to invent a bed that generates energy when animated activity is performed on it.

Innovation is not only in technology-based solutions. Every market in Kenya has a section where the vibrant trade in second-hand clothes happens. There are usually heaps of clothes neatly segregated by type to allow for easier picking. There is even some level of specialisation: shirts, trousers, ladies' clothes, children's attire and shoes.

The *mitumba* traders traverse the county with bales of clothes worth millions of shillings. They hire thousands of youth as clothes sellers. Young men and women sell second-hand clothes in a well harmonised promotional sing-song, urging buyers to explore the displayed wares. "*Ni ya leo, ni ya leo, akina baba, akina mama, ni ya leo ni ya leo.*" This translates to: *It's today's fashion, for men and women. It's today's item.*

The youthful traders have innovated marketing strategies based on an intimate knowledge of their clients' needs. The youthful sellers, aware of the desire of their clients to purchase the latest fashion trends, use their singing to reassure buyers of the contemporariness of the fashions. At a certain point they tease the buyers by telling them, "*Chagualeo, chaguasasa, kuonanakushikashikani bure, kubebandiopesa*", which translates to: Look and touch [items on sale] is free and one only pays if they wish to carry an item away [buy].

The sing-song promotion is picked up by the hundreds of sellers and engulfs the entire market in a well-choreographed performance. At its peak, it's reminiscent of a pantomime and the sellers even wear some of the clothes on sale to add colour; cross-dressing is common. It reminds one of a Bollywood film segment. In an environment where marketers are competing with multiple sellers, the innovative, attention-grabbing pantomime works more effectively than giant billboards or loud-hailers.

Potential for a thriving cottage industry

Innovation by the youth has demonstrated that there is a great potential for a thriving cottage industry-based economic growth model that will also provide thousands of jobs. A cottage industry is a small-scale, decentralised manufacturing business often operated out of a non-designated industrial complex or purpose-built factory. Cottage industries often focus on production of high-skill, labour-intensive goods as opposed to mass-market items.

Today cottage industries seek to serve a market looking for original hand-crafted products as opposed to mass-produced, name brand products. In the past, items that found their way to the *kawaida* market were products from cottage industries. The clay pots, the wicker baskets, leather bags and other household items had a long supply chain that ensured employment for those who dug up clay, kneaded it, moulded pots, fired them and those who transported them. The supply chain of a

papyrus mat standing at a market is even longer and includes people harvesting papyrus in boats on floating islands.

Beyond that, the cottage industries maintain a link to traditional artisanal skills passed on from one generation to the next. Cottage industries are responsive to emerging challenges. I recently witnessed some young artisans in Holo Market in Seme repairing handles of *pangas* and knives using discarded plastic. Anyone who has bought the mass-produced Chinese farming implements know how vexing the short life of their handles are. The youth who once worked in metal foundries, collect the plastic, and then melt and mould it into a handle that will probably outlast the implement.

In many markets today you will encounter young men and women pressing (using innovatively made blenders) and selling fresh sugarcane juice blended with ginger, lemon and mint. Every seller has arrived at a unique recipe and this nameless cocktail is drunk more than the mainstream juices or carbonated drinks. There are those who blend vegetable juices and even groundnut juice laced with *omugombera*. *Mondiawhytei* an indigenous tree that acts as an appetiser, breath freshener and is rumoured to be an aphrodisiac. There are refreshing juices made from a combination of all manner of fruits and vegetables.

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In parts of the coastal region, there are the signature cassava crisps, the sweet potato cakes and biscuits from Kabondo. There is a young entrepreneur in Kisumu who is rearing and promoting edible crickets that are added into wheat dough to make highly nutritious biscuits. There are many more innovations in the *kawaida* markets that are solving local problems, as well as providing solutions to global challenges, such as environmental degradation and climate warming.

There is a colonial hangover in the way that modern African economies perceive markets that is constantly receiving push-back from the innovators. The fixation with stock, bond, securities, forex and derivatives markets while ignoring the markets where a majority of the citizens have developed innovative approaches and ingenious solutions to local as well as global problems is counter-intuitive, counterproductive and inimical to development.

Kawaida markets, which sell the innovative products derived from our cottage industries, also act as purveyors of our culture while presenting a unique solution to the economic as well as the health and environmental challenges facing us. The stock, bond, securities, forex and derivatives markets are important because these open us up to a global economic system, but the space in which we transact our livelihoods is the *kawaida* market where the traders and buyers meet.

A thriving innovative hub connected to local markets provide platforms for creative solutions to the world's needs while offering the youth a livelihood. Community and social cohesion is built premised on the mutual need for one another and fairness is the ethic that guides transactions in *kawaida* markets. What defines us humans is that we transact: we do so in recognition of mutual needs and inter-dependence, and we negotiate seeking a fair exchange from each other. We transact, therefore we are.

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