



By Moses Ochonu



In the last three decades, scholarly interest on entrepreneurship has exploded outside the traditional quantitative disciplines of economics and business studies. This is traceable to the global ascent of neoliberal capitalism, which has drawn remote corners of the world into global webs of capital and substituted self-help entrepreneurship with state-directed ameliorative economic projects. Humanists and qualitative social scientists have brought much-needed critical perspectives to bear on the study of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship.

One of the legacies of this humanisation of entrepreneurship studies is the extension of the observational and analytical lens to the Global South, a region of the world simultaneously regarded as a place dominated by a poverty-incubating pre-capitalist economic ethos and as a fertile ground for recruiting new entrepreneurs. The emphasis on producing indigenous entrepreneurs emanates from an assumption that Africa lacks capitalism and capitalist relations of production, an assumption that Horman Chitonge [debunks](#). There is also a need to deconstruct paradigmatic understandings of not just capitalism but also of entrepreneurship, the supposed means to capitalism in Africa.

Africa has been at the centre of two cross-cutting processes: one focused on the alleged prevalence of pre-capitalist or socialistic poverty, the other on producing entrepreneurs to combat that poverty. The escalation of poverty in Africa from the 1980s, itself partly a product of neoliberal reforms, ironically opened the door to the neoliberal veneration of entrepreneurship as a remedy for mass poverty. Many anti-poverty interventions in Africa today seek to remake Africans into rural and urban entrepreneurs through instruments such as microfinance, revolving credit, and cooperative lending.

## Economic messiahs

The proliferation of entrepreneurial projects in Africa in the neoliberal moment inspired unprecedented Africanist scholarly interest in entrepreneurship, enterprise, innovation, African capitalism (or [Africapitalism](#)) and the culture of self-help. As new groups of entrepreneurs emerged on the continent and engaged in a variety of capitalist, wealth-creating activities, Africanist scholars from a variety of fields began to develop new vocabularies and concepts to explain this entrepreneurial wave. This scholarly corpus has been illuminating, but it has also been plagued by conceptual imprecision and confusion.

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The problem, as I want to show in this reflection, was that the Africanist entrepreneurial perspective that emerged had blind spots imposed by dominant formulations developed to understand entrepreneurial cultures in Euro-American contexts. There are two other inter-related problems. One is a failure to develop an analytical toolkit that accommodates the capacious and amorphous entrepreneurial lives of Africans who were pigeonholed into the new neoliberal category of the entrepreneur. The second is a failure to adequately critique the exuberant, self-assured discourse of entrepreneurs as economic messiahs and replacements for the economic responsibilities of the dysfunctional African state.

The first problem turns on the deployment of notions and definitions derived from the dominant Schumpeterian perspective on entrepreneurship. Joseph Schumpeter's major contribution to the study of entrepreneurship lies in going beyond understanding the entrepreneur as one who had the skill to "combine the factors of production" and situating the entrepreneur in a more ambitious project of disrupting the process of value-creation. Schumpeter saw the entrepreneur not just in personal terms but also in terms of corporate agency, of the aggregate transformative impact of multiple, simultaneous, or successive entrepreneurial initiatives. Unlike other theorists, Schumpeter saw the entrepreneur not as a manager but as a catalyst, an innovator. Clearly, the empirical setting of Schumpeter's theorisation is a European industrial one, giving his postulations a decidedly Eurocentric flavour.

The Schumpeterian paradigm applies to the innovatively disruptive capacities of some contemporary African industrial entrepreneurs. However, this explanatory model is problematic when called upon to illuminate the activities and priorities of other African entrepreneurs outside the capitalist industrial matrix. The Schumpeterian explanation does not know what to do with Africans whose enterprise consists not of the familiar portfolios of our modern capitalist imagination but rather of an eclectic corpus of holdings embracing the social, political, artisanal, and economic realms.

In trying to understand African entrepreneurs in all their diversity, we have hamstrung our own conceptual liberty and boxed ourselves into an analytical corner. The effort to comprehend African entrepreneurial modalities has suffered as a result. Our love of neat, hard categories and vocational identifiers have stifled our ability to appreciate the full range of African entrepreneurship. As a historian, my frame of reference is the African past and that is where I'd like to go to develop this contention.

## Entrepreneurship in precolonial Africa

In precolonial Africa, entrepreneurship was not a narrow, bounded vocation. Instead, entrepreneurship manifested in particular ways of doing things, and in any organised activity that promised personal or communal rewards. In this capacious definitional universe, enterprising warriors were entrepreneurs. They transformed the art of warfare from a regimented, sporadic activity to one with its own routines and protocols. Historian [Uyilawa Usualele](#)'s chapter in my edited volume, *Entrepreneurship in Africa*, rightly argues for a recognition of the entrepreneurial ingenuity of Benin warlords, spiritual consultants, priests, and religious purveyors whose repertoire included the professionalisation and deft organisation of multiple social vocations. Their sophisticated endeavour, as Uyilawa demonstrates, entailed the adoption of business management principles that we today associate with entrepreneurs.

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Warrior guilds, whether in precolonial Ibadan, Asante, Dahomey, Buganda or Zulu, were sites of entrepreneurship. When systematised and conceptualised as a professional business venture, as it was in many precolonial African kingdoms, warring involved planning, management, delegation, tasks, goals, deliverables, compensation, the creation of value in the form of war spoils, the distribution of dividends, and reinvestment in processes that improved war making.

War making entailed post-operational accounting, the calculation of profits, and periodic stocktaking — in other words, elaborate formal and informal bookkeeping. It was a business, and the guilds, warrior cults, and military training programmes of precolonial African kingdoms were business schools of sorts. Many of today's warlords are also conflict entrepreneurs, leveraging war as opportunities for profit.

I have chosen this unlikely example to illustrate my point that in Africa entrepreneurial pursuits were not and are still not wholly shaped by the narrow permutations of combining the forces of production — capital, labour, and knowledge — to produce a profit. The profit motive is not always central to entrepreneurial pursuits in the African context, although profit is an expected outcome of entrepreneurial acts. Furthermore, where present and clearly discernible as the primary catalyst in an enterprise, profit is articulated in less narrow terms than is posited in the economic definitions of classical and neoliberal economic thought.

Historically, African entrepreneurs occupied multiple positions and professions in society; entrepreneurship was only one of several elements that defined them. Moreover, their entrepreneurial lives often existed in symbiosis with the demands, responsibilities, and ethics of the wider culture.

Given this reality of multiple entrepreneurial trajectories and entwinements, it is perhaps more productive to speak of "entrepreneurial Africans" than of "African entrepreneurs", a formulation at odds with the restrictive definitional criteria in normative capitalist thought. The term African entrepreneurs assumes a consistent, permanent occupational identity of people whose lives were consumed and defined solely by their entrepreneurial engagements. Entrepreneurial Africans advances a premise of entrepreneurial possibilities in multiple endeavours and professions.

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society; entrepreneurship was only one of several elements that defined them. Moreover, their entrepreneurial lives often existed in symbiosis with the demands, responsibilities, and ethics of the wider culture.

This complex picture is further compounded by the existence of several “non-capitalist” systems of production, as well as the prevalence of hybrid practices in which self-interested capitalist rationalities coexisted with an ethos of value and reward. If the Schumpeterian model and its derivatives are applied uncritically to African entrepreneurial formations, they raise the question of whether, for instance, entrepreneurs could emerge and thrive outside capitalist relations in a communal African economic setting and, if so, whether the relationship between capitalism and entrepreneurship, which we have long taken for granted, can be sustained in the African context. This question is important because it alerts Africanist scholars of personal and group economies to what they might lose, what analytical opportunities they might miss, and what complexities and realities they might occlude or misread when they accord overarching analytical finality to concepts developed in other places and circumstances and deployed to explain African conditions. Elisio Macamo insightfully makes a similar [argument](#) in regard to the concept of capitalism and its conceptual work in African social science scholarship.

The entrepreneurial independence that, even if only rhetorically, marked the evolution of capitalism in Europe, defined the Euro-American industrial experience, and catalysed the emergence of a distinct entrepreneurial class in that context contrasts with the African entrepreneurial historical landscape. In precolonial times, African entrepreneurs operated at the intersection of profit and power, commerce and culture. Profitmaking was coextensive with social obligations. Entrepreneurs were mindful of societal expectations on them. Society, in turn, recognised that entrepreneurs had special gifts that had to be nurtured and liberated from the sociopolitical routines of daily life. Entrepreneurial pursuits were for-profit endeavours for the most part but profits and service to society were coterminous, as chapters by [Gloria Chuku](#), [Marta Musso](#), [Martin Shanguhyia](#), and [Chambi Chachage](#) in the aforementioned *Entrepreneurship in Africa* volume demonstrate.

Political power holders cultivated entrepreneurs and were entrepreneurs in their own right. Entrepreneurs, on their part, accessed the protective, logistical, and spiritual resources deposited in the political realm. Ultimately, the idea that individual profitmaking could and should coexist with the provision of societal benefit and that entrepreneurial projects should catalyse society’s economic potentials was an unwritten but well understood rule of commerce. Entrepreneurship, which was mobile and malleable, was the defining character of precolonial African political economy.

To speak of a political economy of entrepreneurship or an entrepreneurial political economy is to signal a uniquely African iteration of entrepreneurship in which the political and mercantile realms were and are in conversation and cooperation. The case of the [precolonial Wangara mercantile network](#) in West Africa is an example of the entwinement of value creation and political power. There is clearly a contemporary continuity to this reality. The most consequential and [successful African entrepreneurs](#) of today, such as Aliko Dangote, Strive Masiyiwa, Patrice Motsepe, Tony Elumelu, and others have direct or indirect tentacles in the realm of power and politics. Their business empires relate with host governments and political formations in ways that would offend contrived, self-righteous, and hypocritical business sensibilities in the West. Text-bookish neoliberal Western formulations proclaim the autonomies of the business and political spheres, but these autonomous zones do not exist in the West, as many corporate and political corruption scandals have revealed. Although open to perversion and corruption, in their most productive manifestations, African entrepreneurial cultures that recognise the field of play between economics and politics stand in distinction from the neoliberal obsession with the idea of separating business and politics or protecting entrepreneurs from the alleged meddling and market distortions of political actors.

African scholars, businesspeople, and policymakers in search of an African business ethos will do well to consider this African historical partnership between profit and people.

### **Globalised capital that empowers and privileges**

My second point concerns the limit of entrepreneurship, which needs to be stressed to counterbalance the narrative of multipurpose amelioration that has developed around African entrepreneurship. We live in a neoliberal moment in which entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs are celebrated as potent economic agents and catalysts for poverty reduction and economic growth. Whether entrepreneurs deserve this outsized reputation in our interconnected and interdependent economic ecosystem is a legitimate question. When we talk glibly, and with scholarly certitude, about the capacity of entrepreneurship to lift Africans out of poverty, we are ignoring the structural elements of globalised capital that empower and privilege some while impoverishing and dispossessing others. We are ignoring the ways that global capitalist configurations undercut and complicate entrepreneurial possibilities and opportunities in Africa.

The conceptual impact of Africa's long encounter with neoliberalism on discourses of African entrepreneurship is profound. The nexus of neoliberalism and entrepreneurship is not far-fetched. The neoliberal economic regime imposed on African economies by the Bretton Woods institutions in the 1980s and 1990s dictated an economic paradigm shift for African countries, one that redefined the relationships, obligations, and responsibilities between states and their citizens. One of the most remarkable outcomes of this shift has been the increasing dominance of the figure of the entrepreneur. A corollary development has been the substitution of entrepreneurial self-help for redistributive, reconstructive, and structural economic reforms.

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This lionisation of the entrepreneur is a symptom of a deeper rhetorical, philosophical, and policy gesture in the direction of producing citizen-entrepreneurs who pursue thrift and profits, creatively take charge of their own welfare, innovatively add value to the economy, and thus relieving the state of financial obligations. Neoliberal attempts to engineer into existence ideal entrepreneurial citizens that are self-reliant and removed from the nodes of state obligation were authorised by a new fetish of personal economic responsibility. These interventions absolved the African state of its developmental responsibilities, demanding that poor Africans pull themselves out of poverty by their own entrepreneurial bootstraps.

### **Neoliberal fetishisation of African entrepreneurship**

By seeking to transform postcolonial Africans into entrepreneurs, neoliberal economic interventions misread Africa's past as one in which Africans were pampered by states and as a result ceased to create value through entrepreneurial activity. In truth, there was never such a cessation of entrepreneurial ingenuity in African communities. Nor did states, despite their paternalistic rhetoric and claims, provide robust welfare protections to citizens. Neoliberal entrepreneurial initiatives were cast against a foundational ignorance of the fact that value creation in most African societies is an organic social endeavor and not the intensely individualised enterprise intelligible to neoclassical and neoliberal frames of analysis. Birthed in this original misunderstanding of Africa, the political economy of neoliberalism has entrenched the entrepreneurial figure venerated by International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank policy documents as the discursive referent in studies of

African economic revival. One outcome has been a profound transformation in the very vocabulary we use to designate some Africans as entrepreneurs and to withhold that designation from others.

The damage done by the neoliberal fetishisation of African entrepreneurship is both discursive and practical. Important as entrepreneurs are to the present and future of Africa, all Africans cannot become entrepreneurs, at least not in the neoliberal sense of the word. This sober recognition, which is missing from most external economic reform prescriptions, ought to be a serious preoccupation of Africanist scholars of entrepreneurship. It is the task of Africanists who study capitalism, business, and entrepreneurship in Africa to modulate and critique the exaggerated instrumentalities of African entrepreneurship. This task is necessary to balance the analytical books because we have created a zero sum analytical calculus in which talking more about entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial catalysts results in less talk about structural inequalities inherent in the global capitalist system into which Africans, to varying degrees, have long been integrated.

I want to conclude this reflection with a proposal wrapped in a critique. There is a need to develop a new mode of African scholarship on business and enterprise. This proposed new field of qualitative African business and entrepreneurial studies must necessarily adopt a relaxed analytical framework capable of exploring complex economic lives in ways that traditional scholarship in African economic history - with its neat dichotomies between worker and merchant, king and commoner, bourgeoisie and peasant - is incapable of doing. This kind of study should be able to analyse African entrepreneurial lives that cross class divides and socioeconomic categories.

Traditional debates in the field of African economic history have rarely acknowledged, let alone theorised, the entrepreneurial ingenuity of Africans in a sustained way and in terms independent of other categories of analysis. This erasure is particularly common in the field of colonial economic history. Neoclassical and neoliberal scholars of modern African economic history overstate the instrumental agency of African entrepreneurs. On the opposite side, neo-Marxist and dependency theorists shun or dismiss entrepreneurs as a petit bourgeoisie class undermining the revolutionary struggles of workers and peasants. By lionising or diminishing the figure of the African entrepreneur, the dominant schools of African economic history orphaned the African entrepreneur into a strange category where s/he is either overburdened with the task of saving dysfunctional economies or tossed aside as an economic saboteur.

In the end, the innovative ingenuity of Africans in many entrepreneurial fields is either denied or sensationalised by those who purport to speak for and about African entrepreneurs. What is lacking are stories of African entrepreneurship told by entrepreneurs themselves. We need African entrepreneurial stories curated by the entrepreneurs themselves or at least informed by their perspectives, their self-representation, and their understanding of their own struggles, aspirations, and visions. These stories have to go beyond "How I Made It" memoirs and autobiographies of entrepreneurial success and hagiographic scholarly narratives of problem-solving, self-redeeming African entrepreneurs.

Finally, the question of how we are telling the African entrepreneurship story is as important as who is telling it. The current triumphalist and hyperbolic tone of the conversation has produced a restrictive exercise in navel-gazing. It has also led to an explosion of self-validating, self-fulfilling rhetoric, in which the concept of entrepreneurship is not only advanced as a fail-safe substitute for the idea of the African developmental state posited compellingly by the [late Thandika Mkandawire](#) and others but is also used as a stand-in for more substantive debates about external and internal structural constraints on African development.

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