Connecting the dots...

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Inspired by the Zeitgeist

... how yesteryear business people inspired my entrepreneurial journey

The many years I spent at Old Mutual ignited in me a desire to know a bit of everything under the sun. The craving for enlightenment that grew in me, would drive me to devour everything that came my way in the form of written material. More than that, it awakened the entrepreneurial spirit that lies dormant in all of us and once awakened, I gained an appreciation of what it takes to get started in business.

With hindsight, the tell-tale signs that I would end up in business had long been there, only I was too blind to notice them. Growing up in the streets of Highfield in the 1970s, I had no clue I would one day run a business of my own; all that mattered back then was the want for parental love, food on the table and clothing, most of which were scarce, – especially after my parents went through an acrimonious separation and divorce.

To avoid thinking about problems back home where our stepmother, Bertha Mlambo, was a constant pain in the wrong place, I found comfort in spending time with my friends playing street soccer. In time I developed a liking for popular Harare soccer giants, Dynamos whom I began to support.

My romance with DeMbare – as Dynamos FC is affectionately known by its legion of fans – would explode when I was assigned by my stepmother to sell oranges within our neighbourhood, which was not far from Gwanzura Stadium, built in the 1960s by brothers, Eric and Phanuel Gwanzura in order to give the natives access to modern sporting facilities they were being deprived of by their colonial masters.

The task would become a double-edged sword for me as it would give me the opportunity to watch every game that Dynamos played in the ten-thousand seater stadium while at the same time selling oranges to soccer-crazed fans who needed something to keep them hydrated, especially in summer when the top flight league would be in full swing.

Most of the time, I would return home full of the joys of spring when Dynamos won their matches, which was the norm during the club's glorious years when they had the mentality of a lion. Whenever the team had a bad day on the field, I would leave Gwanzura Stadium with a long face, which was not helped by the fact that Dynamos' hard-to-please supporters tended to spend less when their team tasted defeat.

To keep track of what was happening at my favourite club, on-and-off the field of play, I became friends with the print and electronic media, as they would ride on Dynamos' popularity to attract readership and viewership. When my father and my uncle, Tongai, were relaxing at home, they would send us children to buy them newspapers from the newsstands and because I had such an interest in knowing what was happening at Dynamos, I would run so I could read all about it.

Being the first with the news amongst my peers turned me into a purveyor of juicy updates about the team's players as well as the latest on who was joining Dynamos, who was leaving the club and the transfer fees that were involved. I knew each and every player from the time they joined Dynamos Juniors, and would follow their progression into the senior team, until such a time they would hang up their boots or be transferred to other clubs.

I also knew in exact detail what each of Dynamos' former players was up to, including in their retirement, with the lucky ones finding a role at the club as either assistant coaches with the junior or senior teams. I also kept a collection of old annual calendars that featured soccer stars for each season as these were dominated by Dynamos' greats.

It was a moment to savour for me when Dynamos signed Matthew Mwale from the then Mhangura FC in 1976. Arguably one of the best goalkeepers Zimbabwe has ever produced, Matthew would keep Dynamos alive in most games he played with his acrobatics. Other great goalkeepers to keep guard at Dynamos include Frank Mkanga, my good friend Japhet "short cat" Mparutsa, George Mandizvidza and Gift "Umbro" Muzadzi

I consider myself privileged to have seen George Shaya, aka Mastermind, at his best in the mid-1970s and when the Greatest of All Time died in August 2021 at the age of seventy-seven, having had one of his legs amputated after developing deep vein thrombosis due to decades of inactivity, it pained me deeply.

It was at Gwanzura Stadium where I also got to know and admire players from rival teams whose talent was just too good to be ignored. It was a marvel to watch the Chieza brothers, Tendai, George, Winston and Itai, in action, combining their skills for their beloved Mhangura FC, where they formed the nucleus for the copper miners who won several titles back then.

At Zimbabwe Saints, formerly Mashonaland United, there were equally fine players such as Gibson Homela, Musa Muzanenhamo, Onias Musana and William Sibanda, with Highlanders – the country's oldest club founded in 1926 – boasting gritty players like Bruce Grobbelaar, Edward Dzowa, Barry Daka, Geoffrey Mpofu and Josiah Nxumalo, among others.

Then, there was Chibuku FC, which became Black Aces before it became Blueline Aces, as well as several other clubs that competed for honours in the premier league in which yesteryear footballers played their hearts out for pride and honour, unlike those of today who are driven mainly by the colour of money.

It was through my passion for soccer that my reading and writing skills were honed as I would not miss the opportunity to flip through the pages of local newspapers, starting from the back page, where soccer news was featured. Little did I know that my penchant for reading would develop and change my life for the better.

Apart from my passion for soccer, I also became interested in broader conversations cutting across national, regional and global dynamics, because once back home from selling my stepmother's fruits, I would be that fly on the wall, listening to animated discussions between my Father and Uncle Tongai, who were both well-versed in current affairs.

Along with our neighbour, Mr Chapwanya, the brothers would sit on the veranda during the weekends when they had days off and all they talked about was the politics of the day.

They would talk about the Eastern and Western global divide, lauding countries from the East for steadfastly supporting the guerrilla war against our erstwhile colonisers. They would deride colonialism and imperialism in the harshest of terms, going against what was coming out in the official media, which would dutifully do the bidding for Ian Smith's regime.

Tired of the official media's sickening and unashamed propaganda of lampooning our comrades as terrorists, we started tuning in to either the Voice of the Revolution (VOR), which used to broadcast from Zambia or the Voice of Zimbabwe (VOZ), which aired from Mozambique. Both VOR and VOZ were in the hands of the liberation war fighters. As such, they would provide generous airtime to leaders of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), in the case of VOR, and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), in respect of VOZ, who were mostly in exile, to mobilise guerrilla fighters from their respective wings as well as the masses to support the war effort, since the official media was tightly controlled by their nemeses.

VOR and VOZ would become vehicles through which ZAPU and ZANU countered the propaganda from the mainstream Rhodesian media through the broadcast of content consisting of news, commentary, listeners' letters and requests for revolutionary songs, bringing fame to the likes of Webster Shamu, who was known back then as Charles Ndlovu, and John Tirivafi Kangai who would become part of public broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation's senior staffers at independence in 1980.

From eavesdropping on conversations between my Father, Uncle Tongai and Mr Chapwanya, I developed an interest in other beats apart from sports. Add the VOR and VOZ broadcasts that I listened to, my mind was opened even more to not only my immediate environment but to my remote surroundings to the extent that by the time we relocated to Chifuri Village in Chiduku in the late 1970s, my consciousness about the goings-on of the time was already awakened.

My interaction with and exposure to the comrades in Chifuri Village where the war of liberation was intense in the years 1978 to 1979 further raised my understanding of the importance of information and the management of it, seeing how the guerrilla fighters or vana Mukoma, as we used to call them, would dispel untruths and half-truths as well as rallying the masses and the comrades to press on with their agenda using the power of information.

The need to be continually in the know of what was happening would continue after relocating back to the capital and during my time at Rukweza Secondary School from 1984 to 1985 where I would cover a total distance of about twenty kilometres – to and from Mukada Service Station in Nyazura – twice a week running, in order to buy newspapers..

Against such a background, landing a job with Old Mutual in 1986 would take my quest for knowledge several notches higher. As much as I learnt the intricacies of starting and running a business at Old Mutual, I knew if I were to keep abreast of what was happening around me I needed to read not only local and foreign newspapers, but also books, so I could better understand the world around me.

I was quick to realise that our lives are a product of the internal and external forces and that while most of what I learnt at Old Mutual was mainly to do with the internal side of things (systems, processes et-al), there was another side (the external factors), which I was still missing and I realised in order to understand the environment within which I lived in full, I also needed to take the external forces into account, while also learning about systems at Old Mutual.

I took a particular interest in how big businesses of the time such as the Meikles Group, TA Holdings, Mashonaland Holdings, Lonrho and Anglo American Corporations were founded and how they evolved over the years. I also sought to find out how black-owned businesses of the time, among them Pfumo Taxis, Sharaude Taxis and Mushandirapamwe Hotel, among many others, came into being.

This was long before the word indigenisation came into our vocabulary. I got inspired reading your typical from-rags-to-riches stories of the likes of Philemon Machipisa Murambiwa; the Chiweshe brothers, John Tsindi and Paul John; Ben Mucheche; Paul Matambanadzo and Myles Kupara Chanakira whose humble beginnings made their journeys sweeter than that of those who started with the chiming of bells.

As early as the 1970s, Machipisa was already a household name country-wide because of his astuteness. When many of his generation had a low opinion of those who built houses in urban areas instead of their villages, Machipisa was already big in real estate, owning over twenty houses. He had swathes of farmland and a thriving retail business which he operated in Highfield, along with his brothers – Wilson, Rishon and John – as Machipisa Stores, from as far back as 1954.

Mucheche, Chanakira and Matambanadzo were up there among the early pioneers in the public transport business and their empires outlasted the colonial regime despite being under constant surveillance by the Ian Smith regime for their role in propping up the liberation struggle. As a young boy, a good number of these stories would blow my mind given what these business luminaries had gone on to achieve in terms of material wealth, which looked like a big mountain to climb.

When I got the opportunity to sit down for a chat with a few of these colossal giants such as Tobias Majaji Musariri, I would ask them unending questions in an effort to get a deeper understanding of how they had achieved success. Musariri had a jaw-dropping story to tell, and I was privileged to share it with the world when I penned his obituary upon his death in August 2012 at the age of seventy-four.

Having started off in the mid-1960s as a second-hand clothes hawker, Musariri had established a string of supermarkets, butcheries, etc by the 1970s, and ranked among the first successful black commercial farmers. To get to the top, he had to break the glass ceiling, becoming the first black member in the Motor Trade Association where he fought to secure a General Motors franchise for the Bedford and Vauxhall vehicle brand.

One other black businessman who rose above the challenges and distinguished himself as a shrewd entrepreneur was George Tawengwa, born in the same month as I was, on the 6th of March 1915. With interests spanning across transport, properties, retail, agriculture and hospitality industries, Tawengwa, who owned the famous Mushandirapamwe Hotel in Highfield, became the first black millionaire in United States dollar terms in the then Rhodesia. He also made history by becoming the first black person to purchase a commercial farm in pre-independence Zimbabwe. When he died on the 13th of April 1982, at a relatively young age of sixty-seven, he reportedly owned nine large commercial farms, averaging one-thousand hectares each.

Apart from the trailblazing Tawengwa, pre-independence Zimbabwe was also home to many other enterprising black business people who included Paul Tangi Mhova Mkondo; Roger Boka (founder of Boka Tobacco Floors); retailers Denis Makomva and Aiden Mwamuka; Alfred Zwambila (the first indigenous person in Bulawayo to be granted a liquor licence); Benjamin Muvuti (who was rated the best insurance salesman not only in Rhodesia but Central Africa); Isaac Hanzi Samuriwo (businessman, and former Member of Parliament in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland between 1958 and 1965); hotelier Patrick Kombayi of the Midlands Hotel in Gweru; transport operators Enoch Musabaeka and J.R Zvinoira in Manicaland and hotelier and transport operator, Joseph Mtshumayeli.

What makes these stories inspiring is that during the colonial era when these and other black business people flourished, there were structural impediments that had been put in place by the Rhodesian government to stifle the growth of their businesses. Among other things, the native Africans did not have formal access to credit. To complicate matters, most of them did not have title deeds to the properties they owned, which could be used as collateral to acquire loans to start businesses. And yet, despite these challenges, they still managed to establish thriving businesses even though blacks were largely restricted to transport and dealer shop businesses. It is for this reason that such extraordinary stories played a huge part in inspiring me to want to be like these indefatigable business people who, against all odds, built successful empires.

In my judgment, these early entrepreneurs inspired Zimbabwe's early Zeitgeist which would gain currency in the 1980s and 1990s as the energized black population jostled for opportunities in the mainstream economy.

Derived from the German words Zeit, meaning "time" and Geist, implying the "spirit", scholars refer to Zeitgeist as that unique spirit, nature or climate synonymous with each era and which sets it apart from other epochs.

Tawengwa and others of his generation blazed a trail, illuminating the entrepreneurial paths for generations to come. When Zimbabwe was born in 1980, only ten percent of national wealth was controlled by blacks, twenty percent by whites and seventy percent by foreign capital, according to estimates. Expectations were therefore high that blacks, who constituted ninety-seven percent of the population, would get a better deal after independence.

By the mid-1990s the situation had not improved much, with fifty percent of manufactured output generated by just three white-controlled firms while commercial farming was controlled by four thousand white farmers who owned most of the arable farmland in the country. When various foreign companies, which owned about seventy percent of Zimbabwe's wealth began disinvesting from the Zimbabwean economy, their interests were largely taken over by local white business people and not by blacks.

The foregoing prompted black business lobby groups to push for more favourable economic conditions for the locals, marking the introduction of the word "indigenous" in our lexicon. One such organisation was the Indigenous Business Development Centre (IBDC), which was established in December 1990 due to the need to broaden indigenous people's participation in the economic affairs of the country.

By the 1990s, several other local business people had emerged, among them Mutumwa Dziva Mawere who left a high-paying job at the International Finance Corporation to pursue business interests in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, pulling a major surprise when he acquired Shabanie Mashaba Mines (SMM) in 1996. Through his Africa Resources Limited, Mawere became a significant player in many other sectors before a controversial reconstruction order disturbed his rhythm.

Another prominent business person to emerge at the time is Simba Armstrong Mangwende, who would become a good friend of mine when our paths crossed later. Other prominent business people to emerge during that period included James Makamba; Oliver Chidawu, Hosiah Mapondera, Delma Lupepe, Jonathan Kadzura, amongst others.

In the years that followed, IBDC became a nationwide platform with structures at national, district and ward levels, making it the only "authentic" native business people's association in the country and also catering for various business lobby groups such as the Zimbabwe National Farmers' Union, the Women in Business Group, and the Zimbabwe Transport Organisation. Among other things, IBDC was created to push for the breakdown of white economic monopolies, the de-regulation of laws and procedures which fetter black enterprises in favour of laws compelling banks to finance black business, preferential allocation of government contracts or markets to blacks as well as general State support for black business development.

The founding members of IBDC included Ben Mucheche of Mucheche Investments, a transport and farming empire; Strive Masiyiwa of the then Retrofit before the billionaire went on to form Enhanced Communication Network or Econet Wireless Zimbabwe (EWZ) — a telecoms business that went on to become a global player; Enoch Kamushinda of Metropolitan Bank; John Mapondera of Farirayi Quality Foods and Fiat Uno — a major exporter and vehicle supplier and Chemist Siziba of Cosmos Cellular — a telecommunications services and equipment supplier.

Though IBDC founders themselves became fairly successful entrepreneurs running thriving businesses which included banks, transport firms, telecommunications concerns as well as exporting entities, other business people increasingly became disenchanted with the pace of indigenisation. They vigorously pushed for radical transformation as opposed to the mild reformism which existed at the time.

The most prominent of the new empowerment groups that emerged to give impetus to the indigenisation agenda included the Affirmative Action Group (AAG), which was more radical in its approach than IBDC. Its founding members included the late Peter Pamire, Phillip Chiyangwa and Saviour Kasukuwere, amongst others, with the likes of Temba Mliswa and Supa Mandiwanzira joining AAG in later years.

Years later the Indigenous Business Women's Organisation (IBWO) was formed by black women led by Jane Mutasa to lobby against the marginalisation of black businesswomen and to help women access resources to fund their enterprises. IBWO argued that the IBDC and AAG were not gender-sensitive enough and that women needed an advocacy group exclusively focused on their issues.

In a bid to energise the indigenisation agenda, the National Reconstruction and Development Board (NRDB) was formed in January 1995, chaired by chartered accountant, Elton Mangoma, who later became a Movement for Democratic Change founding member in 1999. Made up of both IBDC and AAG members, NRDB was meant to be independent from existing pressure groups with its objective being that of bringing together technocrats and astute business people to develop a policy framework for black economic empowerment.

Sadly, NRDB's attempt to unify various indigenisation lobby groups came to naught as the different groups continued to follow the dictates of their patrons. Another new radical empowerment group that was formed out of the frustration emanating from IBDC's inertia on the indigenisation front, was Sangano Munhumutapa, formed by former University of Zimbabwe student activist, Lawrence Chakaredza. Having renamed himself Chief Munhumutapa III, Chakaredza's Sangano Munhumutapa took a more hard-line stance and vowed that "the nation will wake up to find the site cleansed of the white man. And we will be auctioning pieces of Rhodes' grave like they did after the fall of the Berlin Wall."

As this was all happening, indigenous entrepreneurs would quietly make inroads in critical sectors of the economy, among them banking, where the National Merchant Bank became the first indigenous bank to operate in the country's financial services sector, fronted by the likes of Julius Makoni, James Mushore, Otto Chekeche and Francis Zimuto, with William Nyemba also in the thick of things.

Nyemba would go on to form Trust Merchant Bank along with Chris Goromonzi, Nyevero Hlupo and others.

It was a period that would see many other indigenous banks springing up, amongst them Nick Vingirayi's Intermarket, Christ Wesley Takura Tande's Time Bank; Jeffrey Mzwimbi's Royal Bank; Nigel Chanakira's Kingdom Bank; Mthuli Ncube's Barbican Bank; Farai Rwodzi's Interfin Bank; Obert Mpofu's Allied Bank and Kasukuwere's Genesis Bank, amongst others. It is unfortunate that most of these indigenous banks were allowed to twist in the air amid accusations and counter-accusations which would need a whole book to unpack.

Blacks also broke into the mobile telecoms arena where Masiyiwa and Makamba spearheaded the formation of EWZ and Telecel Zimbabwe, respectively, with more inroads being made in the wider telecoms sector where the likes of Kwanai Kashangura founded Africom with many other indigenous operators investing in internet service providers and fixed communications where the likes of Shadreck Nkala deserve special mention.

Perhaps the biggest empowerment initiative was the land reform which saw over three hundred thousand blacks displacing the four thousand whites off farms as part of the government's efforts to redress past historical imbalances. A great deal, however, still needs to be done to turn swords into ploughshares as most of the farms lie idle and neglected due to lack of funding and inadequate skills to make them productive.

Nonetheless, indigenous groups believe it is not yet Uhuru given the skewed ownership of capital intensive mines, which favours multinationals. Amidst the ratcheting from lobby groups, it was not surprising when the indigenisation crusade notched up a gear in March, 2008, when former president, Robert Mugabe, signed the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Bill into law to give Zimbabweans the right to take-over and control many foreign-owned companies in Zimbabwe, including mines.

Specifically, over fifty-one percent shareholding of all businesses in the country were to be transferred into local African hands. The Act defined an indigenous Zimbabwean as "any person who before the 18th of April 1980 was disadvantaged by unfair discrimination on the grounds of his or her race, and any descendant of such person". This Act would be put on the backburner after it spooked investors – both local and international.

In a bid to lure foreign direct investment, President Mugabe's successor, HE President Mnangagwa, proceeded to enact the Companies and Business Entities Act in 2019 which effectively scrapped the indigenous policy, which was deemed unfavourable to foreign investors who after the change, are now able to set up operations without adhering to the fifty-one-forty-nine percent shareholding. Through the Companies and Business Entities Act, foreign companies can now be issued with a Certificate of Incorporation without surrendering fifty-one percent of their shareholding to locals.

I subscribe to the new approach of not compelling foreign-owned companies to surrender majority stakes to locals, being an advocate of the ground-up approach myself, whereby I prefer that entrepreneurs start their businesses from scratch, unencumbered by legacy issues. At the very least, foreign-owned companies must find ways to support locals through initiatives that include procurement policies which deliberately favour previously disadvantaged groups, especially women and the youth, and promoting growth and equity in communities in which they operate.

Tied to these efforts, the government needs to create conditions for the locals to unleash their potential, which will be the subject of one of my forthcoming instalments. But before I focus on how government could step-up the indigenisation crusade without unnerving foreign investors, including those who are already invested in the country, my next instalment will shed light on how I was inspired by the Zeitgeist to begin a series of business experiments before establishing Nyaradzo in 2001, such as photography, auctioneering, refrigeration and engineering.

I owe it to the early pioneers in business who rushed in where angels would have otherwise feared to tread, as well as those that came after them riding on the coattails of indigenisation. I could have remained comfortable at John Fairbairn's creation were it not for them, perhaps preparing to celebrate my thirty-sixth anniversary as an Old Mutual employee this coming July.

Perish the thought!