The African Dream

Meet Inspiring Entrepreneurs on the Continent

Sophia Bogner and Paul Hertzberg

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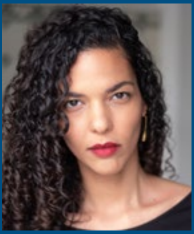

Sophia Bogner (* 1987) studied literature, economics and politics in Paris, Shanghai and at the University of Cambridge. She then joined Burda as Head of Business Development, where she was jointly responsible for the international media and digital businesses. She came to journalism at 27, when she went to the German School of Journalism and was trained as an editor. She subsequently reported from abroad for Spiegel, Zeit and FAZ, among others.

Paul Hertzberg (*1990) first studied history and then archaeology in Berlin. Then he dropped both to become a reporter. He began his journalistic career as a local reporter at the Berliner Morgenpost and Die Welt. In 2016, he moved to Munich to train as an editor at the German School of Journalism. There he was a scholarship holder of the Bavarian Journalists' Association. After finishing his editor training, he worked from Germany and abroad for Spiegel, VICE, brand eins and Reportagen Magazin.

Together, Sophia Bogner and Paul Hertzberg have been reporting as freelance foreign reporters, mainly from Africa, since 2019. They have written for most German major print and online magazines, including Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, Reportagen Magazin, Stern, NZZ, FAS and brand eins. They have now reported from 15 different countries, mainly in the form of reportages and portraits. They have also produced radio features from Ghana and Ethiopia for Deutschlandfunk. Paul and Sophia have been awarded the German Journalism Prize and the Ludwig Erhard Prize for Business Journalism, among others, for their reporting. In October 2022, their first book was published at Ullstein-Verlag: Jenseits von Europa - Was afrikanische Unternehmerinnen und Unternehmer besser machen.

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Meet Inspiring Entrepreneurs on the Continent

By Sophia Bogner and Paul Hertzberg

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Foreword

When two young and widely travelled journalists have a dream and they knock at your door and say, please help us make this dream come true, one should listen. The dream that Sophia Bogner and Paul Hertzberg had, was to travel across the African continent and find entrepreneurs who are following their respective dreams of a particular enterprise, and a special idea against all odds.

They first knocked at the door of Dr. Stefan Friedrich, the director of the Sub-Sahara-Africa Department at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in Berlin. Despite the fact that a publication in German, for a German audience could not be supported by KAS, Dr. Friedrich saw the potential for this project being translated into English and French – then being made available to an interested audience in Africa – and thus be turned into a project of KAS.

The KAS Media Programme for Sub-Sahara-Africa was put in charge of this project, since it is also in its mandate not only to work to strengthen democracy, but to also encourage an entrepreneurial spirit in the region. Together with the advisor on economy and trade for Sub-Sahara-Africa, Gunter Rieck Moncayo, we discussed the plan for this project with the two journalists. We helped with contacts and advice in quite a few places, suffered with them when they came down with the Coronavirus in Kenya and when these two Germans were denied boarding for a flight out of Entebbe because their papers were supposedly not in order.

These two excellent writers and journalists pushed on despite all odds, just like the entrepreneurs they were interviewing. And now we have this inspiring collection of portraits from all over Africa, that demonstrate the entrepreneurial spirit of young and old, male and female, in African economies.

In the past couple of months, these two writers have won some prestigious journalism awards in Germany. With the English version, with all texts written for this edition, we wish to present the entrepreneurial passion that they have met on the African continent to an interested public in Africa and beyond. A truly fascinating picture – and hopefully, very inspiring to many young women and men on the African continent!

Christoph Plate
Director KAS Media Africa
Johannesburg, South Africa
October 2022

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Introduction

The African Dream

There are clouds everywhere, over the Congo, over Gabon and the Gulf of Guinea, thick and dark, but then, over Nigeria, it breaks open, and we see Lagos. The plane descends. The city swells, shacks and skyscrapers, highways and runways, clogged and jammed by hundreds and thousands of cars and millions of people. But on the plane, no one films the view – no murmurs or amazement. Seat backs fold upright, and laptops are shut. Jackets are smoothed out; the Economist stowed away. This is not a tourist flight. It is a business flight for businesspeople. It is the African Dream in action.

A whole continent dreams it. It is spreading in minds and concepts. It is taking root in boardrooms and start-up garages. The African Dream. It always has been, and still is, the dream of freedom. The only difference is that today it is not dreamed of by independence fighters but by founders. It is a new dream – of the freedom that comes with success. It is the dream of African entrepreneurs. They are building. They bet on the future. They fly business and read the Economist. They dream in Nairobi, Accra and Dakar. And, of course, in Lagos, the city below the plane, where the African Dream becomes a fever dream.

We spent six months researching for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS). We were in 13 countries south of the Sahara and interviewed 19 entrepreneurs in four time and five climate zones. We sat in co-working spaces and factory halls, in tankers, in front of gold mines, in the Hotel Rwanda, in fashion studios and money transporters, in big cities, and in the bush. We spent half a year chasing the African Dream. And we found it. Nowhere are entrepreneurs as exciting as in Africa. Nowhere is making money as exciting as here, and nowhere does so much depend on it.

“Africa is the last untouched market in the world,” says Mikael Samuelson. Samuelson – Swedish, Nordic-sober – is a professor at the University of Cape Town. He teaches growth finance and quantitative methods. That sounds like analyses, numbers and Excel realities, but his students are dreamers: Africa’s founders of tomorrow. Samuelson has worked in Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Mozambique, Namibia and Botswana; everywhere he went, he saw numbers – numbers that are rising.

Africa is growing rapidly; 1.3 billion people live on the continent today. By 2030, it could be 1.7 million; there would be more Africans than Chinese. Since the 1970s, the middle class has tripled. Today there are 330 million people, and with them, consumer spending is growing by almost four per cent annually, to US$1.9 trillion in 2021. But it is the cities that are growing the most. Millions want to rent, eat, be entertained, have laptops, clothes, art, want to buy, buy, buy, many for the first time. In Lagos, high-rise buildings are proliferating. Addis Ababa is a construction site.

“The demand keeps rising,” says Samuelson and the supply is barely keeping up. Africa’s markets are young. The dream is just beginning; its outcome is open. It is a game of roulette in full swing. The ball is racing, and anyone can bet. “In Germany, every new idea competes with ten others,” says Samuelson. Much has already been done. “Not in Africa,” he says. “Here, companies can grow with the market instead of against the competition.” That’s another thing the African Dream thrives on: reality has enough room for it. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Samuelson says. “The only question is, will it be used?”

“Over 400 African companies,” says Acha Leke, “do more than a billion US dollars in annual turnover.” He likes numbers like that. They are crisp. They are surprising. “Africa is underestimated,” he says. Leke is a senior partner at McKinsey and Africa office head. He speaks in consultant-crunchy sentences. He writes reports with consultant-crunchy titles such as “Lions on the Move” and “Africa’s Business Revolution.” Leke says: “Many large African companies are growing faster and more profitably than their international competitors.” He has examples of this. The crispest is that of Equity Bank.

Twenty years ago, only one in ten people in Kenya had a bank account. There were hardly any loans, let alone small ones. Then Peter Munga founded Equity Bank in 2014. Thirteen years later, two-thirds of Kenyans had an account; the bank had 12 million customers, assets worth US$ five billion and a profit of over 270 million.

Stories like these are often told in Africa. They are myths of extraordinary growth, of success from nothing. They are about Eliko Dangote, the richest man on the continent, about Flutterwave, Interswitch and Jumia, the unicorns of Africa. Hundreds of websites celebrate the African Dream, “How we made it in Africa,” and “Africa’s promising entrepreneurs.” On a continent where politicians fail en masse, founders become heroes. Their stories tell of an Africa catching up because it has space and more and more customers. Everything is moving, not just fintech and apps but industries that have long been occupied in the rest of the world.

“I was new,” says William Tewiah, “I wanted to get in there.” Tewiah used to be an investment banker. Today he is an entrepreneur. This KAS report will also be about him. His company is growing like a start-up – in an industry so old that the British Empire and Persia went to war over it. William Tewiah sells oil and petrol. He fights criminals, old prejudices and global industry. “The right entrepreneur,” he says, “can make a lot of things happen in Africa.” In Europe, he says, prosperity is managed. “In Africa – there are still real challenges.”

Africa has the worst road network, health system and electricity network in the world. All deficiencies, all deficits, all defects. But, for entrepreneurs, everything is exciting; everything has potential. Revolutions are commonplace in Africa because so much needs to be revolutionised. Everything works better, faster and smarter and those who succeed become rich and famous. They change the lives of millions, like Poro Power, a start-up from Côte d'Ivoire.

"We fought for seven years," says Jean-Marc Aie. And now, finally, he will build it – the largest solar plant south of the Sahara. This report will also be about Aie. About his dream, a €150 million project – and his partner, a German medium-sized company from Tauberbischofsheim. The world is talking about climate change, says Aie, about the urgently needed revolution. "In Africa, we want to lead it. The economy of Côte d'Ivoire should grow – and become green." If Aie succeeds, his Ivorian-German project would again be a model for all of Africa, a revolution.

Disruption is not a buzzword in Africa but a necessity. That's what makes founding here so exciting. That's what makes founders so important here; they have to grow because of the size of the problems. The African dream hangs on them – now more than ever. Africa is at a crossroads again. The roulette ball strikes and clicks. It falls. The stakes are enormous.

Our plane is taxiing out. Stop. Welcome to Lagos. The sun is low. The sky looks like a carnivorous plant. We push out of the plane. Then the crowd stops – Covid test control. The man at the counter is young, friendly and corrupt. "I can't scan the QR code," he says. "What did you bring me?" He's not the only one who wants money. He's just the first. A border guard in uniform asks, "What have you got for me?" A soldier with a rifle asks for a donation. The woman at customs opens suitcases, searches and says, "Nice bag. May I have it?"

Six of the ten most corrupt countries in the world are in Africa. It is a poor continent, a hard continent; in parts, a dangerous one. The reasons for this are manifold. They range from the Portuguese, the first Europeans to ram their flag into the sand of the Gold Coast, to the slave trade, colonialism, and the civil wars of the 1990s. For a very long time, only this misery shaped Africa's image in the world: the heart of darkness, the continent without opportunities, the poorhouse of the earth. But then history changed.

In 2006, George Soros called Africa "a bright star on the horizon of the world economy", and that was just the beginning. "Africa rising" became the new narrative. Economists conjured up the rise. Ache Leke and McKinsey wrote about lions on the rise. Samuelson's numbers began to grow, and life expectancy increased. More and more people were learning to read and write and belonged to the middle class. Fewer and fewer lived in poverty. From 2000 to 2010, Africa's economy was the second fastest growing in the world. The dream was awakening. Now the rise shaped the image of Africa: a rising star, the future, tomorrow – and then came Covid 19.

In 2020, Africa experienced its first recession in a quarter of a century. The World Bank says 58 million Africans could plunge back into poverty. The middle class is shrinking, tourism is disappearing, and commodity exports are faltering. Only 4% of all Africans are vaccinated. The pandemic hit the continent like a runner in a sprint. Africa is stumbling, and perhaps it will fall.

"The biggest challenge now is to create more jobs," says Margret McMillan. "Everything depends on that." McMillan teaches economics at Tufts University in Massachusetts. She monitors markets in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Rwanda. McMillan thinks macro. Every year, 20 million people flood into the labour market in Africa. If they find work, the continent could boom. If not, they will leave Africa with millions of economic refugees yearly. "Jobs need to be created for them," McMillan says. "In Africa, you can't overestimate the importance of entrepreneurs."

Jobs, jobs, jobs, then. But how can that be done? Sangu Delle says: "Mainly with the help of the internet." Delle is an entrepreneur and investor. He comes from Ghana. He is young and motivated, gives TED Talks and writes books. Delle preaches the African Dream as if from a pulpit. And when he does, he claps his hands. "The internet" – clap – "makes Africa" – clap – "sexy" – clap. "Nowhere," says Delle, "does it drive progress as it does here." The internet was a game-changer. Now it is supposed to save the dream.

Twenty years ago, there were fewer phone lines in sub-Saharan Africa than on the island of Manhattan. But by 2016, Africa had more than 700 million mobile connections – about one for every adult. Half of the world's mobile money users live south of the Sahara; 66% of all mobile transactions occur here. Africa is skipping the savings books, the cheques, the remittance slips – and landing on the mobile phone.

These are exciting times for app developers and tech start-ups. But not only for them. The internet makes even small businesses in Africa dream big. In the past, there was a world between Dakar and New York – today, it's just a click away. That's why there are careers that did not exist pre-internet, like that of Sarah Diouf.

This report will also feature her: a fashion designer from Senegal, 31 years old and known worldwide. Diouf produces in Dakar and sells in Europe and the USA. Her label, Tongoro, is famous but small. Marketing takes place on Instagram; sales are only online. The world can see Tongoro on the internet – and Senegal profits. Diouf employs tailors, models and photographers in Dakar, buys fabrics at local markets, rents from local landlords and makes and converts money.

"Every successful start-up," says Sangu Delle, "creates a ripple effect." New jobs create new consumers, new spending, and more demand to be served. This is true on a small scale for Diouf and a large scale for Mobile Money. Millions can now manage money, buy and sell, start up and make even more waves. "We are creating whole systems – now they need to grow," says Delle. "We need Pan-African giants operating across the continent." So far, he says, this is hardly happening. Only a few companies expanded beyond their countries, but that could soon change.

Africa's markets are facing a revolution. This time it is political. It is called the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA).

AfCFTA regulates the establishment of an African Free Trade Area and was ratified by 22 countries in 2019. Almost all other states on the continent have since signed; only Eritrea has not. AfCFTA is supposed to unite Africa's different trading blocs. Turn 54 countries into one gigantic market with over one billion consumers. So far, the agreement is mainly a declaration of intent. But, in the coming years and decades, it is to become a customs and monetary union, even an economic union. AfCFTA is supposed to strengthen foreign trade, boost growth and tear down borders. "If it works," says Mikael Samuelson, "it will change everything."

At Lagos airport, it gets darker and darker. The sun is setting. We wait. For four hours, our visas are processed; Africa's borders seem pretty intact. Waiting with us are a few Americans, many Chinese, and, it feels, half of Africa. There are Rimowa suitcases and sports bags, two men drink beer, and a woman falls asleep. There are caftans, dresses and jogging trousers, smart suits, big bellies and crocodile shoes. Before Nigeria's visa check, we are all the same, sweating wet. The fan fails against heat and impatience. Resentment wafts from row to row. The border officials dawdle. The border officials hurry. They process visas with tablets and pencils, make landline calls, tap on displays, scan fingers and scribble on pads.

In Africa, everything always happens at the same time.

People use mobile money – and pay for onions at the roadside with smartphones. Donkeys haul cement sacks. Skyscrapers grow. Middle Ages and modernity, tablets and pencils. In Africa, hundreds of cultures speak two thousand languages. It is not a place; it is a continent, a whole piece of the world. China, India, Europe and the USA would all fit into it. Africa is extremely large, diverse and different. Botswana is ahead of Belgium in the democracy index. Eritrea is the "North Korea of Africa." Only those who must fly to Somalia and honeymooners fly to South Africa for wine tours in Stellenbosch. "The poorest countries in the world are in Africa," says Sangu Delle. "And six of the fastest growing economies."

Because everything is always there in Africa, everything is always true. Poverty and advancement, dictatorship and democracy – everything can be proved. Afro-optimists and Afro-pessimists – all find their proof. Many do not look twice because even the first glance shows what I believe is true. That creates personal truths instead of facts, narrows the view and ends in clichés.

With this report, we have therefore chosen a different approach. We looked at details and tried to approach the continent through individual countries, individual stories and Africa's entrepreneurs.

Who are they? What could they move? What are they already doing?

In this report, we will find out all that. It will take us through 13 countries in 16 entrepreneurial stories. It is about William Tewiah, changing an entire sector in Ghana; Jean-Marc Aie, revolutionising energy supply in Côte d'Ivoire; Sarah Diouf, producing clothes in Senegal; Grace Amey-Obeng fighting racism with skin creams and many, many others, in Zimbabwe, Congo, South Africa, Mozambique and Uganda.

They are women and men entrepreneurs from different sectors. They create jobs on a small and large scale. They have ideas that can be learned from far beyond Africa. They struggle. They fail. They succeed. They make money. None of them has ever met the others, but they all dream the same dream.

It takes six hours before we leave Lagos airport. Outside, the night is like a steam bath. We push our way through crowds, shouting money changers and baggage handlers. The taxi smells of air freshener. The driver plays hip hop. Cooking fires flit by, street stalls, billboards. Then we pick up speed; wind at last. On the right, the slums of Makoko sink into the water. The skyline shines in front of us. Tomorrow we will meet a founder here, Temie Giwa-Tubuson. Jack Ma has invested in her company. Mark Zuckerberg said: "If she can pull this off, she will not only change Nigeria but countries all over the world."

Sarah Diouf, Tongoro Studios, Senegal

Sarah Diouf's big moment lasts five seconds. The video begins. The chant begins, *"Uishi kwa muda mrefu mfalme."* Long live the king in Swahili. A child blinks into the new morning. A lion sits on a mountain. The music swells. And then she shines on – Beyoncé in a jumpsuit by Tongoro Studios, by Sarah Diouf, from Senegal. One, two, three, four, five seconds. Camera pans. Waterfalls roar. Crescendo! The sky rips open. Sun and dust. Africa.

This is Spirit, a music video by Beyoncé Knowles, perhaps the biggest pop star in the world. Five seconds in this video means five seconds on the world stage. That certainly plays a role in Sarah Diouf's extraordinary success, that Beyoncé wears her clothes. But much more crucial is that a US pop star starts a song in Swahili. Much more important is that Africa is cool now.

"What a time," says Sarah Diouf, "to be black." She is 31 and one of Africa's most famous fashion designers. Sarah produces clothes in Senegal and sells them all over the world. Something is happening in her industry that has long been predicted; Africa is waking up globally. "Africa is going to be the next big thing," says Sarah Diouf. "The only question is: who will benefit from it."

Senegal's capital, Dakar, is the most North African city in West Africa – a sandy-yellow sea of houses against which the Atlantic rolls. Heat shimmers over flat roofs and around the tops of minarets. And over everything lies the dust carried by the Harmattan, the desert wind from the Sahara.

Sarah's office looks like the ZARA version of this city. Everything is styled; everything says concept store. There are necklaces on low tables and a sand-coloured carpet on the floor. "This is where I sit," Sarah says and sinks onto a stool – a small woman with a soft face who likes to laugh. Behind her, seat cushions, smooth-brown wooden knick-knacks, candles and vases with feminine curves – butt vases, bosom candles. Sarah's office is like her fashion, Africa to feel good in, Africa for everyone.

Sarah's big promise is the core of her brand: fashion conceived by Africans, made in Africa. "This could be the next big production site," she says, "that's what I dream of." But between Sarah's dream and reality, so far, stand the numbers. Three trillion US dollars – that's how big the global fashion market is. Only 1% of that, US$31 billion, is turned over in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the e-commerce fashion market in Africa is growing by 14% annually. If this growth continues, Sarah's dream could become a reality. The only question is when.

"Soon you will conquer the world" – that doesn't just sound like a fortune cookie; it comes from one. Sarah posted a photo of it on Instagram. Below she wrote: "I was about to go out, but this #luckycookie motivated me to keep working. There are no #incidences." For Sarah Diouf, everything is connected. "Nothing just happens," she says. The Beyoncé thing, her life in Senegal, not even the accident that nearly killed her that started it all.

Sarah was 19 years old when she was run over in Paris. She was on a scooter, it was raining, and she did not see the car coming. For six months, she lay in bed in plaster and immobile. She could do nothing, only read. So, she read Vogue, Elle and Harper's Bazaar. She saw, "Only skinny white girls." "I was never white, and I was never skinny," Sarah says. "I wasn't represented."

While still in hospital, she founded Ghubar, a digital fashion magazine for people of colour. The fashion world celebrated, and Sarah became famous. Her magazine was everything she missed from the established. On the first cover: a black woman. On the second: a gay couple. "Who is this aimed at?" Sarah was asked. "Everyone," she replied, "as many as possible." That is the competitive advantage of diversity. Diversity has the largest possible target group: everyone.

Global clientele and international success. That's as far as Sarah goes. That was true in Paris for Ghubar, and it's true in Dakar for Tongoro. "Dream big or don't dream at all," she writes on Instagram. #BuildingAnAfricanDream. "Monsieur Ortega of Zara started small too," she says, "and now he runs an empire." So that is what Sarah wants. Her African Dream is not big, but gigantic. Tongoro is to be a powerhouse, following the Zara model.

But the Baghdad-beige concrete block in the heart of Dakar, where Tongoro's offices are located on the top floor, shows from the outside that Sarah's empire is still under construction. The façade is crumbling. The staircase is narrow. Then, at the top, Tongoro Studios: three rooms, kitchen, bathroom; design, finance, tailoring – an apartment-sized headquarters.

Tongoro is famous but small. The label, carried by Beyoncé, makes as much turnover as a well-run pub, €255 000 annually. "But the margin," says Sarah, "is quite respectable." She doesn't want to reveal exactly how big it is. But she likes to talk about turnover. In 2022 they should double. In 2023, Sarah wants to break the million mark. "The last two years have been fantastic," she says. That was due to Beyoncé, of course, the e-commerce boom fuelled by Covid 19 – and a global movement.

"Tongoro," says Sarah, "has benefited greatly from Black Lives Matter." For centuries, being black and being African was a handicap. But now, for Sarah, that very thing could become an advantage. Globally, demand for products from "black-owned businesses" is on the rise; Oprah Winfrey promotes her favourite "black-led companies," and InStyle recommends "seven black-owned beauty brands." Sarah says, "More and more people are looking for an identity." Part of that identity is what Tongoro sells, Pan-African fashion – an attitude to attraction.

Sarah's grandparents came from Senegal, the Central African Republic and Congo. Sarah grew up as a middle-class child in Abidjan, on Côte d'Ivoire. When she was eleven, her world came crashing down. "In the morning, I was still going to school," Sarah says, "at noon, the civil war came." In 2002, part of the Ivorian forces staged a coup; the interior minister was shot, and there was chaos in the streets. "That same day, I was sent to my aunt in Paris," Sarah says. "I will never forget that."

Almost 20 years later, she sits in her office in Dakar, in this bubble of smooth wood and beautiful clothes, and takes a deep breath. "The last few days," she says, "I hardly dared to leave the house." Protests have been rocking Senegal for a fortnight. Police arrested an opposition figure; the youth took to the streets, dust mixed with tear gas. Thirteen people died. "It immediately reminded me of that time," Sarah says. "The noise, the smell – everything was there again."

She hates that feeling when the ground gives way when no one knows what will happen tomorrow. That is also why she loves Senegal. Because Dakar is a peaceful city, the country is one of the most stable on the continent. But Senegal also has problems. "We need more education, more opportunities, more jobs," says Sarah. She could be in Paris now, in London or New York. But she is here, in Dakar. "Because I want to create jobs in Senegal," she says. "Because Africans should benefit from Tongoro's success."

When Sarah started making clothes in Senegal, she was not doing it for Africa; she was doing it for her friends. She was 24, worked a lot and achieved a lot – she needed a break. So, Sarah flew to Senegal, to her family, sought rest and found inspiration. She discovered Dakar's music, restaurants, Marché HLM and the tailoring and fabric market. Sewing machines rattled everywhere. Piles of colourful fabrics were piled up. In the middle of it, Sarah drew a crop top, a pair of trousers, and a kimono on her sketchpad. "A simple design," she says. It was sewn, and then she flew back to France.

Fashion Week, Paris, 2015. A showcase for the fashion elite and the important. Everything glittered, glimmered, shone. Models walked and stood. No one was eating, but everyone was hungry for new, new, new and the next big thing. This is where Sarah arrived in the outfit from Dakar. Glances flashed enthusiastically over her crop top, trousers and kimono. Cameras clicked; fashionistas asked, "Where did that come from?" "From Dakar," said Sarah. "Who designed that?" "Me," said Sarah and an editor of Elle said, "Call me."

A year later, Sarah founded Tongoro and moved to Senegal.

She had been living there for a year when a friend called and said, "You've been robbed." He sent a picture of a clutch as long as a baguette. "I was shocked," Sarah says. The bag was hers, but the name on it was not. It did not say Tongoro; it said, Yves Saint Laurent. Sarah sounded the alarm, her friends tweeted, and Teen Vogue spoke of a “battle of two brands.” For a moment, the press looked to Senegal – and Sarah’s start-up became the brand Tongoro. As a designer, she is still saddened today, but as a marketing professional, she knows that was Tongoro’s first big moment.

Then the second one was, of course, Beyoncé.

Since then, Tongoro has gone from strength to strength. In 2019, Sarah launched her line for men. That, too, is always sold out. 2021 saw the launch of Tongoro Home, with back vases for everyone and wooden iPhone holders. Next year, in 2022, Sarah’s label will be featured on Net-a-Porter, the most famous online luxury fashion retailer.

The fashion world always wants more Africa. And Sarah has the right strategy – and the right style. Tongoro is not ethno-chic but metropolitan-modern, not special but special. Sarah’s clothes flatter every figure, every type, every age, and almost everyone can afford them. Tongoro’s most expensive piece costs €300. That is fashion for millions and could be Africa for everyone. “I’m not just the woman whose label Beyoncé used to wear,” says Sarah. “I want to conquer the world with a global thing that comes from Africa.”

Beyoncé’s video Spirit – with sun and dust, the lion and Sarah’s black and white jumpsuit – was shot entirely in Arizona. But that does not matter. Africa can be anywhere.

William Tewiah, Zen Petroleum, Ghana

Toilets are important to William Tewiah. He opens the cabin door, sniffs and looks suspiciously. The air ventilates. William nods. The floor shines. He is satisfied. He does this every time, at every one of his petrol stations, offices and depots; the first thing William does is check the loo. “If the toilets are dirty, you can forget everything else,” he says. “That’s where it starts, isn’t it?”

So, this is how it should begin, the end of the rule of the multinationals, with a cleanly scrubbed toilet.

After all, William is concerned with nothing less. The fight against the big players and the reorganisation of an industry. His company, Zen Petroleum, sells millions of litres of diesel and petrol in Ghana. His African company is competing against Shell and Total against international oil. “No matter how big the battle,” William says, “it is won in the details.” With every litre sold, every satisfied customer, every clean toilet bowl. Of this, he is convinced. “You can do everything better,” he says. And what he means is Africa can do it better.

In 2010 – the year BP’s Deepwater Horizon exploded in the Gulf of Mexico – William founded his company. He now has 800 people working for him; his company turns over half a billion a year. Zen supplies diesel and petrol to customers all over Ghana, almost 30 million litres a month, 180 000 bathtubs of fuel.

Most of it comes to Ghana by ship. The fuel lands in tankers in Takoradi and Tema, the largest ports in the country. The pumps run day and night. Litre after litre flows into Zen’s warehouses. Warning lights flit over steel-toed boots, safety helmets and everything is certified with ISO 900:2008 and ISO 14001:2015 and BS OHSAS 18001:2007.

In the cities, Zen’s fuel powers minibuses and school buses, small cars and trucks, and the pickup and trucks of the police and politicians. It fuels an entire industry in the interior: Ghana’s gold mining, one of the country’s most important economic sectors. Ghana is Africa’s largest gold exporter. Over one hundred tonnes are extracted from the ground here every year. It takes excavators, trucks, caterpillars and fuel, a lot of fuel. Fuel is worth US$350 million every year.

When William entered this business ten years ago, the market belonged to only two companies, Shell and Total. Today, Zen supplies 70% of all mines. The rest is done by Allied and Goil, two state suppliers. Shell and Total have disappeared completely. Not a single litre comes from the multinationals anymore. William wants to repeat this success. Since 2019, Zen has been attacking again. This time in the petrol station business.

“Electric mobility is still a long way off in Ghana,” says William. He is sitting in his office in Accra; outside the window are trucks and SUVs. “The roads are full,” William says, “people need to fill up, the economy is growing, motorisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, we need to power that, fast and affordable.” The 21st century will not change that either, he adds. The global Zeitgeist might be green, but Ghana’s drive remains black.

William has opened 40 petrol stations since 2019, with plans to add two more every month from 2022. It’s the next step in the Zen Game, out of the gold niche, onto the streets and into the cities. All over the country, William’s petrol stations advertise his philosophy, the Zen Way. “Zero losses, zero delays,” William says, no losses, no delay. “A litre is a litre,” he says and “It starts with the toilets.” This is more than orderliness. It’s not Swabian, but necessary – because William is African.

“When a multi makes a mistake, it’s considered exceptional,” William says. “When the same thing happens to an African, it’s typical.” African entrepreneurs are like women everywhere in the world – they have to be three times as good for equal recognition. “Our reputation is not only bad in the West,” William says. Africans also distrust Africans. That’s why he does not tolerate mistakes, lost litres or missing toilet paper rolls. Because he also has to prove in Ghana that Africa can do better.

“If William wasn’t so obsessed,” says Payin Marfo, “I wouldn’t be here.” Marfo wears dark lipstick, and her hair is razor short. She was a manager at Shell until five years ago, when William poached her. “The whole sector in Ghana had the same problem,” Marfo says. “Thieves.” The loss was enormous. After staff, theft was Zen’s second most significant cost. William negotiated, paid and punished, but nothing helped. Eventually, it struck him; all the problems had a common denominator. “Men,” says Marfo, grinning as if she had always suspected it.

So, in 2017, William founded Ladybirds Logistics, a Zen logistics subsidiary that works only with female drivers. “Since we’ve been driving with women,” says Marfo, “nothing gets stolen anymore, there are no more accidents, and everything arrives on time.”

In Ghana, Zen nevertheless remains the underdog. Against William’s 40 petrol stations, there are 251 from Total and 200 more with the Shell logo shining on them. “These are huge companies,” says William, “they could flatten me tomorrow.” William does not mind. On the contrary, it spurs him on. It’s the position in which he feels most comfortable; a fighter no one sees coming, a player who is underestimated. This is the role he has cultivated as a businessman and learned all his life as an African.

At 17, William had only one question: Where is the money? The answer seemed clear: “Ghana was poor,” he says. It was not there. “But England was rich.” That’s where it had to be. So, he moved there. He loved Africa and did not want to leave, but he had to know: Where’s the money? That’s when it came to him. It was very simple. Where is the money? At the banks.

William did his banking licence in one year instead of three. He did not understand what leisure time was. Holidays even less. It sounds hard when he talks about that time. A bit merciless, a bit lonely. But in the end, William succeeded, and, in 1994, he went to Merrill Lynch. It was the heyday of investment banking, the Masters-of-the-Universe cocaine Brioni suit time. And William was in the middle of it. He had made it into the fast lane. There it was: the money in Bergen. You could take it in. You just had to work hard enough.

In his late thirties, William had a serious car accident. The scar on his temple is still visible today. “After something like that,” he says, “you look at your life differently.” William left London and set up his own business. He worked in Switzerland, Germany and Asia as a business analyst for Credit Suisse, UBS and Deutsche Börse. “The sums got more and more insane,” he says, “but the value of my work got less and less.”

In 2007, William bought what many men buy when looking for meaning, a Porsche. He had dreamed of owning a 911 since he was a child, but now that he owned it, it did not feel right. There he was, hanging behind the wheel of his dream car, which was just a car, after all, struggling on a Hessian Autobahn while speeding Germans honked their horns and jostled behind him. That was it for Europe. William had seen it all, achieved it all; he put on his indicator and took the exit.

William moved back to Ghana. He bought real estate to secure his income and met friends to avoid getting bored. Then, one evening an acquaintance told him about the gold mines. He said he was unhappy with his fuel suppliers, Shell and Total. He said the petrol was bad, partly adulterated. William knew nothing about the mines or the fuel market, but he saw something he recognised, something he had seen many times before, an opportunity to do better.

William’s first client was Gold Fields, a South African company that operates two mines in Ghana. The company had put out a tender for three million litres of diesel, worth about US$ three million. “I didn’t know if it was a lot,” William says, “but I wanted to get in.” So, he offered to deliver for free, at cost. Gold Fields chimed in. Zen was in business. “The game was on,” William says, “and I wanted to win.”

Zen won. It grew, year after year, mine after mine switched from Shell and Total to William’s Zen Petroleum. “By 2019, after just ten years,” says William, “we had completely displaced the competition.”

And the competition? They don’t say much. Total does not answer questions about Zen, and Shell only says ‘no comment.’ However, a spokesperson adds that Shell does not exist in Ghana. The business had been sold to Vivo Energy. “Why don’t you ask them?” But Vivo remains silent, even when asked, says nothing, not even a comment, so in the end, all that remains are figures.

Vivo Energy operates over 2000 petrol stations in 16 African countries, many under the Shell brand. The company only came to Ghana in 2013, four years after Zen entered the market. So, at that time, Vivo's businesses still belonged to Shell – the group did exist in Ghana. Vivo itself was only founded in 2011 by two other companies. That's where it gets exciting. Because Helios, the founding company, is a British private equity firm and Vitol, the other, Vitol is the big oil.

It's the biggest company in the world that nobody knows about – a commodity trading house based in Geneva and Rotterdam. Every day Vitol moves as much oil as Japan consumes. It is a privately owned empire known for secrecy. Only now and then does something leak out about deals with Serbian war criminals, with Libya and Iraq, about circumventing the trade embargo against Iran, about fines, the last one in 2020 – US$135 million for bribery in Central and South America.

So, if a tanker in Ghana has Shell on it, it's not just Shell in it; it's also Vivo and, therefore, Vitol. That is the competition behind William's competition. A silent superpower, the global oil industry. It was created by the West, by Europeans and Americans. Meanwhile, others are profiting from it, Chinese and Africans. "Corrupt elites, individual families," says William. Never the masses, never the majority. "We are playing a game whose rules are against us," he says. "It's an unfair competition."

Since 2013, Ghana has introduced a new law, the Local Content Law. It is intended to promote local companies in the oil sector and ensure they are given preference in contracts which is a clear advantage for William. Zen is 100% Ghanaian, from supervisory board to petrol station attendant. "The government is doing something," William says, "but not nearly enough." No African politician messes with Shell, Vitol and Total. "No one dares to do that," says William, "even that can be done better."

Josh Sandler, JC Homawou, Uche Ogboi, Lori Systems, Kenya and Nigeria

The start-up story goes like this: A person is young; he has ambitions and a laptop from Apple. He sees a problem; he wants to, he can, he must solve it. Nothing is too big for him. Living, eating, working – even love is more efficient. Disruption, innovation. He founds. He pitches. The world fits on three slides. He raises millions. He gets hyped. Now everything is going to be different. Now everything gets better. Maybe.

Africa is young; it has the most youthful population in the world, it has ambitions and laptops from Apple. Africa has many problems; they should, can and must be solved. Africa needs disruption, innovation, startup nations, founders and hype. This goes on a slide: yesterday was bad; tomorrow will be better. Finally.

Josh Sandler is 33 years old. He is South African and says, “My goal is to optimise entire economic cycles.” Sandler was an investment banker. Now he has a startup with a mission. Lori Systems wants to make logistics more efficient, cheaper and better. In 2021, the company had almost 200 employees and operated in ten African countries. An “Uber for trucks,” it was called “Africa’s fastest growing startup,” “a revolution.”

The story of Lori Systems is about chaos and containers, tech and trucks, millions of kilos and billions of dollars. It’s about a big promise to make everything cheaper and the competitiveness of an entire continent. It is an African start-up story about the nature of problems and the question, can they be solved?

Jean-Claude Homawoo, called JC, is Lori’s Chief Product Officer. He sits in a co-working space on the 14th floor of an office tower and looks out over Kenya’s capital. Outside, Nairobi’s skyscrapers jag into the sky, glass and concrete. To the south, clouds pile up over the national park where zebras and giraffes eye the big city.

Inside the co-working space, there is a juice bar and framed motivational slogans.

“You are your only limit.” And: “Don’t call it a dream; call it a plan.” Everything here is startup-chic and casual Friday. “Everything here,” says JC, “was transported by truck at some point.” He points to the motivational slogans, the juices, and the city outside the window. He says, “It all needs logistics.”

Raw materials, goods, merchandise – everything has to be transported. It has to be moved, packed and loaded. Worldwide, the logistics industry turns over 8.6 trillion dollars annually, 345 billion of it in Africa. In 2014, mankind transported almost 55 billion tons of freight. By 2024, this figure is expected to reach 92 billion. Container ships in the Panama Canal, Amazon Express and just-in-time deliveries – all logistics. “And that’s why transport costs make up part of the cost of everything,” says JC, “of every product and every service.”

“And nowhere,” says Uche Ogboi, “are they as high as in Africa.” Ogboi sits in Lori’s headquarters, 3800 kilometres from JC and Nairobi, in Lagos, Nigeria. She is Lori’s CEO and only in her mid-30s, a tall woman with long braids who likes to laugh loudly, move around a lot and get her way. “In the US and Europe, logistics costs only account for 6-7% of the price of goods,” she says. “But in Africa, it can be up to 70.”

In many African countries, people are paying more for housing, food and furnishings for everything that needs to be moved. This reduces purchasing power and hinders the continent’s development. Intra-African trade remains weak because it is cheaper to import from China than from a neighbouring country. Goods produced in Africa cannot compete globally because poor logistics make Africa expensive. More than 80% of all goods in Africa are transported by truck. That is precisely what Lori wants to make cheaper, transport by road.

“We connect those who want to transport something with those who can transport something,” says Josh Sandler. That sounds simple, but it is not because Sandler, Ogboi and JC are fighting many minor problems on many fronts and one big one on all – chaos. “Most people think logistics is so expensive in Africa because of corruption and broken roads,” says Sandler. “But the main problem is much more basic.”

An estimated 150 000 trucks travel Kenya’s roads. But the largest transport company in the country owns just 1400 trucks, the second largest only 600. The market is extremely fragmented. If you want to transport tons of goods, you have to work with several partners, know all of them and control everything. However, that is difficult. “If you call 40 transporters,” says Sandler, “only 20 will answer the phone, only ten will agree, and only three will show up at the agreed time. “Ninety per cent of the time, the trucks are empty because supply and demand don’t match.”

That’s where Lori comes in, with the classic start-up formula, a platform that connects supply and demand, transporters and freight owners. Both sides have profiles and state what they need, when, where and how. This creates an overview and how prices can be compared. Lori makes supply and demand visible. Initial contact, order processing, payment – everything runs via the platform and ideally automatically, via app and smartphone, without a single phone call.

“Building this product,” says JC, “was like replacing an aircraft engine in mid-air.” Trial and error with the entire operation is a classic start-up. Little by little, it resulted in a logistics platform that does everything but drives itself. If a truck is on the road, Lori tracks its position in real-time. If a truck breaks down, the platform sends a replacement. If a border guard wants to see documents, they are stored in the app. Lori arranges insurance and advances money for petrol if a transporter is short. With every journey, the company collects data, and the more it collects, the more precisely it can be planned, and the better the system runs.

“It’s a win-win-win situation,” says Sandler. Hauliers benefit because Lori acquires customers for them and their trucks are empty less often. Retail giants such as Cargill or Procter & Gamble benefit because they can plan more precisely; costs go down when things run more efficiently. According to his figures, transport costs between Mombasa and Nairobi fell by 25% only two years after Lori entered the market. Finally – win number three – Lori itself benefits. The start-up earns money. A share of every deal goes to Lori. No one wants to reveal how much that is, but there is a video of Sandler at a start-up event, where the founder says: “Between eight and eleven per cent.

Win-win-win, nobody loses – that’s what platforms like to claim. But that’s not always true; hotels suffer under Airbnb and taxis under Uber. “It’s different with us,” says JC because Lori benefitted truck companies already there. The industry dynos are customers rather than competitors, which is why Lori could convince. In 2017, the company only existed in one country, Kenya. Sandler had ten customers on the platform and 300 trucks online. In 2018, just one year later, Lori already operated in four countries and had 70 customers and 3000 trucks. Lori grew quickly, not only because of its product but also because of its backers.

“Investors have struggled with Africa for a long time,” says Sandler. “I had to talk to 300 until our funding was in place.” “Investors,” says JC, “were scared shitless that they would never see their money again.” However, that is changing. Africa now has three major start-up cities, Nairobi, Lagos and Cairo. Only 2% of global private equity capital still flows to Africa, but in 2021, start-ups already raised almost US$4.7 billion – more than in the past three years combined. “Interest in African startups is growing,” says Sandler, “especially in the US and China.” Lori’s main investors are Hillhouse Capital from Hong Kong and Crystal Stream Capital from Beijing. Sandler will not say precisely how much they have invested, but it can still be found.

At start-up events, the guests are young and ambitious. They are looking for contacts, recognition and money. They meet at the elevator pitch and chat at the campfire. The spectacle is big whether in Berlin, San Francisco, Hong Kong or Lagos and the biggest one in Nigeria is Techcrunch Battlefield Africa. In 2018, JC and Sandler performed there and were well received. The audience clapped. In the middle of it all sat a woman Sandler and JC did not know. She worked for an investor, had pigtails down to her waist and laughed loudly.

“When I saw the two of them on stage,” says Ogboi, “I was thrilled.” A year later, the Techcrunch website reports that Lori has raised US$30 million in funding.

Hillhouse and Crystal had invested; EchoVC from Nigeria, Ogboi's employer, was also involved in Series A. For six months, Ogboi helped Lori as an investor. Then Sandler asked, "Don't you want to be COO?" Ogboi switched sides, from VC to startup. Two years later, in 2021, Sandler stepped down as CEO. The founder went on the board, and Ogboi was promoted.

Uche Ogboi, CEO of Lori Systems, sits in her office in Lagos and tries hard to smile. Outside it is getting dark. Inside, the light flickers. It has been a long day. Again. A long week. A long year. Ogboi made Lori big in Nigeria. Half of its turnover is now generated here. It has prevailed in one of the most difficult markets in the world in an extremely difficult time. She steered Lori through the pandemic, and the company is growing again, but no one wants to say exactly how much.

How high is the turnover? "We don't reveal that." And the profit? "That stays secret." Asked if Lori is liable for goods transported, Sandler replies, "There are systems in place to keep the liability from occurring." Asked who Lori's biggest competitor is, Ogboi said: "The status quo."

Lori's CEO is Nigerian, a nationality, but in Africa, also a brand. Being Nigerian means being loud and direct, setting the tone, a great deal of energy and little patience. Nigeria is extreme. It is the largest economy in Africa and the most populous country on the continent. On its coast lies Lagos with 22 million inhabitants, all fighting at any price and every meter. There's a joke Nigerians tell all the time: "If the Americans land on Mars someday, they'll meet two guys from Lagos there who are signing a contract." Uche Ogboi says: "If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere."

"In 10 years," says Sandler, "we will be a global company." That sounds like ambition at best, delusions of grandeur at worst. But Lori has already taken its first steps onto the very big stage. In 2020, the company announced a partnership with Imperial Logistics, one of Africa's largest logistics companies. Imperial's CEO, Mohammed Akoojee, speaks of an "important investment for the whole continent" and says: "Lori is solving a real problem."

"In Africa," Ogboi says, "there are so many problems – you can build giant companies just by solving them." She stands up, opens the door and rushes down the stairs. Downstairs, Lori's co-workers crowd in front of the television. A video game thunders across the screen. It's 9 pm, Friday night – game night! Ogboi dives into the crowd. Suddenly, there is a bang, loud and dry like a gunshot. Everyone ducks. Sparks rain outside the window. Everyone laughs. It was just the power line. It snapped.

Another problem is electricity in Lagos, Nigeria, and everywhere south of the Sahara. But somewhere, in an office on the outskirts of the city, a team is probably already working on it. They are young, ambitious and know how to do it better.

Grace Amey-Obeng, Forever Clair, Ghana

Grace Amey-Obeng wants black women to stay black. That sounds obvious, but it is not because many people in West Africa still bleach their skin. Skin bleaching is the name of this dangerous practice. The fight against this has made Amey-Obeng famous and one of Ghana's most successful entrepreneurs. She has developed a business model from a matter of course. She was one of the first in Africa to produce care products specifically for black skin. "I wanted to make a difference," she says. "I wanted black people to be able to be black and proud."

Amey-Obeng has been running her company, Forever Claire, for over 30 years. She is sitting in her office in the middle of Accra, the capital of Ghana. The walls are painted purple; there are family portraits on the desk. Amey-Obeng leans back, she is 64 years old, but you cannot tell. Her skin is glistening, supple and wrinkle-free. Amey-Obeng has always been well-lotioned. She strokes her hand and talks about her life's theme, skin: "White, coloured, black – that's the hierarchical gradation of many African societies," she says. Being white represents success and wealth; the lighter someone is, the better.

Millions of African women use lightening creams, swallow pills or inject chemicals because of this. In some parts of West Africa, up to 70% of women bleach their skin. This leads to severe burns, pigment disorders and, in extreme cases, kidney failure, infertility and cancer. Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda have banned the most dangerous bleaching agents, but the social problem remains. Too many people make money from it, not only in Africa.

In Asia, America, Europe and Australia, "whiteners" are sold everywhere by L'Oréal, Unilever and Johnson & Johnson. Bleaching is a billion-dollar industry – and it is growing. Worldwide, US$8.6 billion are made annually from whitening cosmetic products. The World Health Organisation estimates that the industry will be worth $31 billion by 2024. Cosmetics companies have come under increasing pressure in recent years because of Black Lives Matter and the global debate on racism. That's why the creams are no longer called "Fair & Lovely," and the word "bleach" has been deleted from the product descriptions; however, the message remains the same – you could be more beautiful, more radiant, brighter.

The fact that the ideal of beauty in predominantly white societies is white, says

Grace Amey-Obeng, does not surprise her. “If people are not even allowed to be black in Africa, where are they allowed to be black?

It is noon, the sun is shining, and air conditioners are fighting the heat at Forever Clair headquarters. Paint is peeling from the walls; the floors are concrete. Five floors are buzzing with women, most under 20, almost all in the same yellow and green uniform. The place looks more like a school than a company headquarters, and there’s nothing wrong with that. Amey-Obeng has been producing more than creams for a long time. In the meantime, the FC Group includes a cosmetics school for aspiring beauticians and a clinic where victims of skin bleaching are treated. Amey-Obeng is simultaneously CEO, school and hospital director with an office on the third floor, in the heart of the hive.

It is never quiet here. Medical equipment beeps and voices hum until the boss arrives. At first glance, Amey-Obeng looks like a friendly grandmother – a round woman in her mid-60s with glittering gold jewellery. Then she begins her tour. “Tock, tock, tock,” her black patent-leather shoes make on the concrete, and the conversation falls silent. “Good morning, madam!” She opens doors like those to children’s rooms without knocking. An operation is in progress on a couch. Amey-Obeng points to a sign and reads aloud, “No talking loud here – treatment in progress.”

Then she returns to her office, the purple walls, and the family portraits. Amey-Obeng has a lot to do. Forever Clair also exists in Nigeria. She has launched a new make-up line and wants to expand further. She wants the company to grow. “Corona delayed our business plans,” she says, “but now we want to take off again.”

Amey-Obeng wants to occupy the same niche as in Ghana in 11 other African countries, beauty products for black skin that everyone can afford. She says the international cosmetics companies don’t scare her; her business is too specialised for that. Her real competitors, she says, are the Chinese. “They can produce cheaper in Guangdong than we can in Africa.” But the entrepreneur wants to get involved in the price war because it is important to her that African women do not have to buy “inferior Chinese products” – and because she can afford it.

According to Ghanaian media, she is one of the wealthiest women in the country. Her total wealth is estimated at US$100 million. She does not want to give current turnover figures for her company. They are difficult to quantify because Forever Clair has many subcontractors. Only this much: the company is currently worth US$8 million. The discrepancy between estimated private and official company assets looks strange from the outside, to put it mildly – but in Amey-Obeng’s world, private and professional are inseparable anyway, family equals company, and private assets are part of the company’s coffers.

Amey-Obeng will now have to help herself to this cash because her strategy is expensive. She wants to control the entire chain from production to distribution. New production facilities, clinics and cosmetics schools will be opened in neighbouring countries. She likes to sell this as philanthropy, the clinics are to heal, and the schools to help young women start their businesses. Soberly, the business idea can also be described as follows: If the women she trains are successful, they will remain loyal to her products for life. She has also earned money from them through course fees, even if they fail.

Amey-Obeng is a clever entrepreneur. “My family was exceptional,” says Amey-Obeng, referring to herself. She got that from her mother, she says. “She was an aggressive woman.” Even before her daughter Grace turned 16, she had started four businesses, run a craft school for girls and operated a hair salon. When she turned 16, her mother let her run the hair salon for a few months. That is when she first noticed how many had their hair chemically straightened and their skin bleached. She was horrified when the customers sat in front of her, in the hairdresser’s chairs, with broken hair and cauterised scalps.

At the age of 30, Amey-Obeng founded her own company. She borrowed the start-up capital of US$100 from her parents. No Ghanaian bank would give a woman a loan at that time. In Accra’s shopping district, Amey-Obeng walked from door to door, where hundreds of women vendors offered their wares in small stalls. “Almost all of them,” she said, “would have tried to bleach themselves back then. Fanta Face was what they called the women with the bright faces whose bodies were still Coca-Cola. “When a Fanta Face opened the door,” Amey-Obeng says, she would explain which products would help. “First, you have to work on looking like yourself again; then, you can work on becoming even more beautiful – and staying black.”

As an entrepreneur, Amey-Obeng has struggled a lot, invested a lot and won a lot. “As a mother, she was always very caring,” says her daughter Shika Obeng-Kamara. “But as a boss, she rules with an iron fist.” Grace Amey-Obeng’s fist may be iron; her fingernails painted pink. “Look at me,” she says. “I’m not old. Black skin gets less wrinkled.” That’s why the whole world thinks she’s robust. “But my skin is just as sensitive as white skin.” When she talks about skin, the tough businesswoman seems almost soft.

She sits in her chair, relaxing, her arms resting on the desk, her eyes on the family portraits. She stretches out her left arm and strokes her shiny skin with her right hand, slowly and obliviously, as if she is conjuring up something.

Grace Amey-Obeng was born in 1957 in a world where most of Africa was still colonised. That is why her company will never be just a company. Just as black is not just a skin colour, being black means slavery; it means being looked at, perceived and treated differently. Being black means Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, freedom movements and independence, street battles and self-assertion. In Africa, it also means living in a society where women mutilate themselves to become white. “Care,” says Amey-Obeng, “is really about being good to yourself.”

“The young Ghanaians,” she says, sounding grandmotherly for the first time, “like their Afros and their skin colour again.” She laughs. Then she says, “They even have these films, Black Panther and stuff.” She likes that. Ten years ago, she used to wear a fancy dress to the office, she says, and now – stroking her brightly patterned dress – she’s wearing African fashion again. “We are becoming proud again.”

Two large photos hang above Amey-Obeng's desk. One shows her with Nana Akufo Addo, the President of Ghana, and one with the King of the Ashanti, the country's largest ethnic group. There are also shots of her meeting the Queen and the Clintons, but they are not hanging here.

Peter Watson, Crocodile Creek, South Africa

“The difference between a cow and a crocodile,” says Peter Watson, “is that the cow doesn’t have such nasty teeth.” He laughs. He knows precisely how nasty those teeth can be when the jaw snaps shut as the lizard bites. He has been injured repeatedly on the hand, shoulder and foot. He has seen one man lose a finger and another almost losing his leg. “In our business,” he says, “flesh wounds are just part of it.”

Peter Watson has been breeding crocodiles in South Africa for the fashion industry in Paris, Milan and Tokyo for 40 years. The leather of his lizards is used to make handbags and watch straps, belts and shoes. Hardly any material is as expensive, exclusive or controversial as crocodile leather – the SUV of the fashion industry. Hermès’ most expensive crocodile bag costs €150 000. The crocodile laptop sleeve by Prada cost €2100.

International luxury companies make 10% of their handbag turnover with exotic leather. That means crocodile, ostrich and snake. The height of elegance, say some: animal cruelty, others. Almost everyone wears shoes made of sheepskin or bags made of cowhide. But when it comes to crocodiles, many ask: Is it necessary? Is it necessary? Should it not be banned?

Peter Watson, a white South African farmer over 80, asks himself more and more often: Is my business, my product, my type still acceptable? “If this keeps up,” says Watson, “we’ll have to close down soon.” He is a tough guy, a nature boy type, but he is worried. Because he knows his existence depends on what people on the other side of the world think is beautiful – and justifiable.

It is eight o’clock in the morning. The sky hangs grey over KwaZulu-Natal, on the east coast of South Africa. “Good morning, Hannibal,” Watson says. Rain drips from trees and bushes onto Watson’s thinning hair and Hannibal’s scales. Hannibal is silent. He is a crocodile, five metres long, weighing 600 kilos. “He’s the only one here as old as me,” Watson says and laughs. He was born in 1940; you cannot be sure about Hannibal. But 80 could also be him, an old man and an old crocodile. Watson says: “Just an ordinary farmer with his ordinary cattle.”

About 6000 crocodiles live on his farm, Crocodile Creek. He slaughters 1500 every year and sells their skins. That sounds like a lot, but Crocodile Creek is only a medium-sized farm. South Africa is the largest exporter of crocodile leather on the continent. There are between 60 and 80 crocodile farms here, with at least half a million animals. "And yet," says Watson, "the bunny huggers claim crocodiles are an endangered species." "Bunny huggers," he calls animal lovers who are more on social media than in the wild. They could not tell an alligator from a crocodile but told him about endangered species. "They don't know anything," says Watson, "they don't even know the facts.

So here are the facts. Crocodiles have long been hunted. The Nile crocodile was on the verge of extinction. Since the farms came into existence, the populations have recovered. Today crocodiles are bred, hardly ever hunted. Watson says that, in this respect, the farmers have saved the animals. He has to say that; he earns his money with crocodiles. It is also a fact: yes, or no to crocodiles, which is not just a question of facts. It's about what you believe and from where you come. It's a question of perspective. Watson's perspective is and always has been African.

Peter Watson was born in 1940 in Kitwe, in what is now Zambia. Back then, the country was still called Northern Rhodesia, and Kitwe was a small town on the edge of the wilderness. "Everyone I knew grew up with one foot in the bush," Watson says. He loved the red earth, the smell of the rain, the heat-crack of the dry season. But in his early twenties, he wanted to see the world. It was 1963, Kenya declared its independence, Kennedy was assassinated in the US, and Martin Luther King gave his most famous speech.

Watson travelled through Uganda and Kenya, Tanzania and Sudan, to Egypt and from there to Europe. At some point, he landed in Brussels. It was a sunny day, and a young woman on a motorbike stopped in front of his hostel. On her bumper was a sticker saying Australia. Watson shouted to her, "You bloody Australians are always polluting the gutter." Six months later, the two got married. Linda moved with Watson to Africa, his homeland. "When we came back, we had nothing," Watson says. "Just two suitcases full of clothes and seven British pounds." Today, 60 years later, he and Linda live in a house with four rooms. There is a small pool, and a dented SUV is parked in front of the door. "I don't drive a Mercedes, but my life was good," Watson says. "I never had to go to the office. I never got stuck in traffic. I was always outside." He and his wife have three children. The farm is not something any of them want to take over. "Because crocodile leather is so expensive, people think we breeders are millionaires." But the opposite is the case, he says. Only 6% of the handbag price reaches the farmers. "Business is tough," Watson says. And lately, it has been getting tougher. More and more luxury groups are entering the farm business, and the market is consolidating. In Australia, for example, only 13 crocodile farms are left, six of which belong to Hermès and Louis Vuitton. In the past, the big brands also bought from smaller farms. Today they want to control the whole production chain. And: earn money from every step of production.

"If this continues," says Watson, "the business will soon only be worthwhile for mega-farms because breeding crocodiles requires a lot of capital and staying power. Female animals only reliably lay eggs after 10 to 12 years. Only after 20 can they be used for breeding and, until then, they cost money. Outdoor enclosures, swimming pools and hatcheries need space and have to be financed. “There is no such thing as cheap crocodile leather,” says Watson. You have to feed a crocodile for four years until it reaches slaughter size. During all that time, it does not eat hay or soya; it only eats meat.

It is 1 pm, and a dead chicken flies through the air, followed by a second and a third. Plastic tubs full of chickens are emptied into the basins. Reptiles, big as pickup trucks, leap up and snap at meat. Water splashes onto concrete. A huge crocodile heaves itself onto its competitors. Snap goes the crocodile. Snap. “They are predators,” says Watson, “with a strong social behaviour.” They fight and bite and lie on top of each other. He wants to keep his animals as species-appropriate as possible. That is good for them but, unfortunately, bad for business.

The fashion industry wants evermore flawless leather. A single grain lowers the price from US$12 to US$2-3 per square centimetre. Watson’s buyers justify this with the demands of their customers: People who buy a bag for €30 000 Euros expect the best quality. Watson disagrees; they are only trying to drive down the price. “It is absurd that the fashion industry wants skins like those from a laboratory,” he says. The only way to achieve that, he says, is to keep crocodiles in individual cages. “That,” he says, “is not species-appropriate husbandry.”

Everything Watson knows about crocodiles; he taught himself. He came to the reptiles by chance at lunch 40 years ago. At the time, a friend told him about crocodile farming. The industry was young, he said, and exotic leather was in demand. The friend asked, “What do you know about crocodiles?” “Nothing really,” Watson said, “they’re bloody ugly and live in water.” Two years later, he founded Crocodile Creek. He had 60 reptiles, one employee and no idea.

Watson learned that crocodiles only hatch once a year, at Christmas. He learned what they like to eat best: chicken and reckless monkeys. Then he learned how to slaughter them. The animals are anaesthetised, and a scalpel is plunged into their skulls. The skin is peeled off and cleaned, disinfected with pesticides, preserved with salt and stored at 4oC for at least a week. From Africa, the skins then travel around the world. The best tanners are in Singapore, Italy and France. There, the leather is treated, softened and made wearable. However, the skins lose their colour during the tanning process. In the end, all crocodiles are grey. That’s why the leather is dyed, sometimes croc-coloured, sometimes red, blue and yellow. That’s how predators become fashion.

In the past, a large part of Watson’s skins went to Germany, today to Italy, China and Japan. That’s all he reveals. No brands, no names. You might think Watson is a bit paranoid. Ask him how he takes the eggs away from the reptiles, and he says: “I hit them on the nose with a little golden hammer.” Ask him how he slaughters the animals, and he says, “I hit them on the head with a little golden hammer.” You have to ask a lot before he says, “I have to be damn careful.”

Watson does not want to produce the next headline. He raises animals and slaughters them like any farmer. "But when I say slaughter, people hear murder. When I talk about skinning, they think animal cruelty." Yet Watson considers himself an animal lover. "To me, crocodiles are not bags of cement," he says, "I'm fascinated by them."

Crocodile Creek has no longer been just a farm for a few years now. Watson has had a small zoo built, a bistro with crocodile burgers and a shop with crocodile products. His target group is Africans. He wants them to learn more about crocodiles. If Watson has his way, they should also wear more crocodile leather in the future.

Because Watson now wants to make fashion himself. He wants to reinvent himself, to take off once again as a fashion entrepreneur at the age of 80. "The market here is ready for luxury products," says Watson. "People have money." A new, young middle class is emerging in South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria. Many of them studied abroad and deliberately returned to their home countries. "They want to make a difference," says Watson. They no longer look to Paris, London and New York, "they want products made in Africa." That's what he wants to focus on now, luxury products from Africa for Africans. His brand should be like the continent he loves, chic but African; Jeep instead of Maserati, heat instead of warmth, shoes made of predators and "cows with nasty teeth." Not France or Japan, just Africa. In 2021 he produced the first small collection. In 2022 he wants to start selling the pieces.

Watson will then be 82 years old, and so will Hannibal, his favourite crocodile. Sometimes, when Watson gives visitors a tour of his zoo, he asks them to bet who will survive longer, him or the crocodile. People then laugh bashfully; they feel uncomfortable. Watson likes that; he says he would always bet on Hannibal.

Temie Giwa Tubosun, Lifebank, Nigeria

Many lives are lost in Nigeria because crime is high, the police are corrupt, and the health system is poor. But one of the most common causes of death is much more trivial; lives are lost because help comes too late. Every day people are injured, sick, or in labour. They need blood – but it does not come. It gets stuck in traffic jams; it spoils in the heat, and people die. It is not violence or war that ends their lives but Nigeria's infrastructure. And it is precisely this that Temie Giwa Tubosun wants to revolutionise – with an online marketplace for blood, including a delivery service. "If she succeeds," Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg once said, "she will change not only Lagos, not only Nigeria but countries all over the world."

It's eight o'clock in the morning in Lagos, and the woman who is supposed to change the world has been getting her make-up done for two hours. Tubosun is enthroned on a stool in the centre of her office. Two female employees circle her. One does her hair, the other her face. Tubuson is sweating and annoyed. Her costume pinches, and everything is taking too long for her. Tubuson could organise blood deliveries now, but she has to sit still. She could phone her office in Kenya, but that will have to wait. First, she gets made up because this morning, she has to go in front of the camera to tell her story again.

Tubuson founded her company Lifebank in 2016 and has attracted much attention since. Because her company has achieved in just five years what many African governments and international NGOs have failed to do for decades: it has rethought critical infrastructure – and improved it.

9 am Lagos, Lifebank headquarters: men in cars are slowly getting angry, honking, shouting. The road has been closed for an hour for Tubosun's advertising shoot. Across the lane are the motorbikes of Lifebank's couriers. Next to them are the riders, grey body armour and red helmets. "Action!" the director shouts, and a microphone dips down to the boss. "We at Lifebank believe that no African should die because essential supplies are not available." "Good," says the director, "one more time." "That's enough," Tubuson shouts, "it's going to be a long day today." Trucks are started, motorbikes pushed away. Traffic spills into the street like an angry wave.

Nigeria is a chaotic country and, above all, a huge one. It is the most populous state on the continent, a country where more than 200 ethnic groups speak more than 500 languages. Nigeria is diverse and has many problems. First and foremost of which is the health system. Among the Nigerian population, 97% have no health insurance. The supply of blood is catastrophic. The country needs two million units of blood every year. Only 500 000 are administered, which is why every injury can be fatal and, above all, every birth. In Europe, only ten out of 100 000 women giving birth die from blood loss. In sub-Saharan Africa, the average is 511, and in Nigeria, 917.

Temie Giwa Tubosun was born in 1985 in Ife, a five-hour drive from Lagos, "in a house full of books". "My sister wanted to be a Brontë sister," Tubosun says, "and I wanted to write screenplays." So, she watched American films and read American books. When her parents told her the family was moving to the US, Tubuson thought, "We'll go to New York or California"; instead, it was Minnesota. Tubosun was 15 years old and had never left Nigeria. Now she was sitting in the North of America, which looked very different from her films, where palm trees did not grow anywhere, and there were no skyscrapers, only long, empty roads and lots of snow in winter.

10:30 am Lagos, Nigeria, city highway: A motorcyclist in grey body armour and a red helmet presses his legs against his machine and accelerates. He dodges pedestrians, trucks and vendors. A metal box, painted hospital white and alarm red, hangs from his machine. "Attention!" it says, "Life-saving contents." The driver is Dammy Asemokhai, one of 50 men transporting blood for Lifebank. That's one side of Tubosun's business; her start-up delivers blood. That's why Asemokhai and his colleagues drive as fast as they can – how long they take is a matter of life and death.

11 am Lagos, Lifebank headquarters: Tubosun strides through the office, assistants in her wake. The walls here are plastered all over with hearts. On each, a name and a date: "Okere, 12/16/2018" or "Charity, 07/21/2019". "These are the people Lifebank saved," Tubosun says, "the recipients of the blood." She knows how to tell stories. As a child, she wanted to write screenplays; now, she writes the plot for her start-up: Lifebank's drivers are heroes, and the company saves lives. That's the number by which the boss measures success, 10 401 lives saved since 2016. But of course, there are more mundane metrics.

"Since our foundation, we have doubled our turnover every year," says Tubosun. However, she does not want to reveal precisely how high it is. Lifebank now exists in three countries, Nigeria, Kenya and Ethiopia. The start-up employs 130 people, but only a third are drivers because delivering blood is only half of Lifebank's business.

Ayo Olufemi is Lifebank's CTO, 32 years old, straight back, stern look. "The drivers are in the foreground," says Olufemi, "but behind that, the data rules." Because Lifebank doesn't just deliver, the company is a digital marketplace, an online platform for blood. Using Lifebank's app, blood banks can list their supplies, and hospitals can order blood supplies like a pizza on Lieferando. "Before we existed," Tubuson says, “demand and supply didn’t match.” Blood lingered and deteriorated. “The consequences were unimaginable.”

Temie Giwa Tubosun always wanted to save the world; only she did not know how for a long time. As a teenager in Minnesota, she thought she would become a lawyer, but that changed when she went to college in 2006. Kofi Annan was UN Secretary-General. “A black man, an African,” Tubosun says, “I thought, If he can be a UN person, so can I.” She studied public administration and health management, interned in Switzerland with the WHO and in Nigeria with an NGO. “That’s when I first saw,” says Tubosun, “how bad things really were here.”

12:45 pm, Lagos, a backyard, midday heat: Dammy Asemokhai parks his motorbike. He shoulders his transport box and enters the building. Inside it is clean but small; a diesel generator runs the blood fridge. There are many such blood banks in the backyards of Lagos. No one knows precisely how many, but there must be hundreds. They are private companies selling only a few litres daily, run by just one person. The man who runs this blood bank is called Nelson Ekpe, who looks like a lab assistant from a Hollywood movie, well trained, chin beard, white coat. “Without Lifebank,” he says, “my business would not exist.”

People donate 200 units of blood to him every week for money. One unit can be stored for 35 days. Before Lifebank, he sometimes had to throw away blood because no hospital bought it in time. However, since Ekpe has been using the platform, no bag has been left lying around. “Lifebank is my office,” he says. Like many others, he used to list his supplies only on paper. Now he manages his inventory via the app. Ekpe goes to the fridge, takes a bag of A Rh positive and puts it in Asemokhai’s transport box. Thick and packed, the blood sloshes in the plastic. Asemokhai fastens the box, gets on his motorbike and accelerates. He has to hurry. A hospital has ordered blood for a woman in labour who is bleeding.

When Temie Giwa Tubosun was 22 years old, she sat on the floor of a hut during her NGO internship and held the hand of a young woman struggling with death. The village was in Kano, northern Nigeria. There is a shortage of many things there, including doctors and blood supplies. The woman on the floor was 19. Her name was Aisha, and she was in labour. The child would not come, and Aisha was bleeding heavily. “Nobody could do anything,” Tubosun says. “People just watched her die.” Aisha struggled all night. She survived, but her baby died. “I broke down,” Tubosun says. For three days, she locked herself in her room. “When I came out,” she says, “I was obsessed with health.”

2 pm Lagos, Lifebank headquarters: “Right now, we have 600 clinics on our platform,” says CTO Olufemi. “And there are more and more.” The startup makes money from them. Lifebank charges a fee for each blood unit delivered. No one wants to say how high that is. The exact price varies from customer to customer anyway. “We cross-subsidise,” says Tubosun. “Those who have more pay more, those who have less pay less.” As yet, this mostly happens in cash and per delivery. “But we are working on a subscription model,” says Olufemi. In the future, hospitals will calculate their needs with Lifebank’s data in advance and pay for it per month. “We are continuing to develop,” says Tubosun.

Before founding Lifebank, Tubuson had her own NGO, the One Percent Project. She was 27 years old, had just moved to Lagos and wanted to make a difference. So, she collected blood at universities and convinced students to donate. "We were quite successful," she says, "but our impact was still small." Tubuson turned 30 and felt something big had to come now. It came – the idea for Lifebank. "Only a private company can really make a difference," she says. "Only when someone is willing to pay for something can you be sure you're solving a real problem."

Her start-up capital came from the CC Hub, Lagos' most important start-up incubator. US$25 000 was given for Tubosun's platform idea. By May 2016, she had built her prototype, but customers failed to materialise. "We had a few hospitals on board," Tubosun says, "but the blood banks not yet." It took Tubosun six weeks to convince a larger one, and the rest followed with the first order. But with it came the second, real problem. Tubosun only wanted to mediate, only provide software, not deliver. But now the hospital called, and a man asked, "Where is our blood?" "I was shocked," says Tubosun. She realised, "I need a new business model." The boss jumped into her car herself. She went to pick up the blood and got stuck in a traffic jam. "It was one of the worst 25 minutes of my life," she says.

There are 3000 private clinics in Lagos. In addition, there are more than 250 public health centres and 26 government hospitals. They all need blood. So why don't they have their own blood banks? "They are not allowed to," says Tubosun. Nigeria's hospitals used to run blood banks so badly that the state revoked their licences. That is why so many independent blood banks emerged and a gap for Lifebank.

In 2016, after rolling out the first orders, Tubuson hired couriers and bought motorbikes. After Lagos, Lifebank took over Nigeria's capital Abuja and then the rest of the country. In 2020, the company expanded into Kenya and Ethiopia in 2021. When Covid came to Africa, Tubuson began supplying oxygen and blood. Airbank, she called this part of her business. By 2021, it accounted for 20% of its turnover, but Tubosun wants more: "Stockbank" is to supply hospital supplies and "Coldbank" vaccines from 2022. Its CTO, Olufemi, is building blockchain encryption and machine learning. Lifebank is to become like an Amazon of the future for hospitals, a system that can deliver everything even before anyone notices something missing.

4.45 pm Lagos, Lifebank headquarters: "In my head," says Tubosun, "I've been running the Lifebank of the future for a long time." Her office is unadorned, with only a poster on the wall. Lifebank Global is written on it, with a world map below. Nigeria, Kenya and Ethiopia are already coloured in. All of Africa and South America, large parts of Asia and even half of the US are hatched. "That's where it could go next," Tubosun says. There, too, there are traffic jams, poor infrastructure and underserved hospitals. "Of course, I'm not starting with Darmstadt or Norway," she says. But the rest of the world should soon hear about Lifebank.

Jean-Marc Aie and Livane Bodain, Poro Power, Côte d'Ivoire

The world is not dark at night, at least not from space. Cities shimmer, and metropolises shine; in the dark, the whole planet glitters like a disco ball. Europe, America and Asia glow; Africa does not. Of all the figures describing Africa's development (and underdevelopment), this one is perhaps the starkest: 840 million people worldwide live without access to electricity – 600 million in Africa.

Lack of electricity is probably the biggest obstacle to progress. It is difficult to measure the impact of a lack of electricity on the economy and society, but it is enormous. In 2020, net electricity consumption in Germany was 488 terawatt hours. In Africa, where 1.3 billion people live, just 700 – and 70% of this electricity flowed into South Africa and north of the Sahara. This makes the electrification of Africa one of the most important developmental tasks of all; and one that concerns the whole world.

Africa needs more energy, electricity and grid expansion; up to now, this has also meant more smokestacks, more CO_2, and more end of the world. The continent will definitely be electrified in the coming decades, but whether that happens sustainably and green or at the expense of the climate will depend on individuals. On entrepreneurs such as Jean-Marc Aie and Livane Bodain.

It is nine o'clock in the evening in a restaurant in Abidjan, and Aie orders *foie gras* with his wine. Michael Jackson is playing in the background. "Beat it," he sings, and Aie pushes her spoon into the *foie gras*. It takes a certain type to order *foie gras* at 32° – and Aie and Bodain are such types. They are in their early forties, big and strong, fathers and husbands, they have struggled for a long time, but now they seem to be winning. Life has been good to them. "But for a long time, it was hard," Bodain says. "Founders like to tell you that you just have to believe in yourself. But no one says you go back to sleeping on mum's couch in between."

Believing and fighting – that's what he and Aie did for seven years. They negotiated with the Ivorian energy minister and planned a mammoth project with German engineers. They collected €94 million in financing and signed a contract with their government. Now it is certain, Aie and Bodain will produce electricity. They will turn on the lights in the north of Côte d'Ivoire without chimneys and CO_2 emissions. "The project is a big dream," says Aie. The project, their project, is called Poro Power.

It is to become the largest photovoltaic plant in West Africa, a solar power plant with 66 megawatts of capacity. In all of sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa is the only country with a more powerful one. But that will change. Prices for photovoltaic technology are falling worldwide. Hundreds of millions in venture capital are flowing into the sector. Solar seems the perfect technology for an emission-free and increasingly affordable new era. Above all, it is perfect for Africa, the world's sunniest continent.

Until now, this potential has hardly been used. Only 1% of the solar energy produced worldwide comes from Africa, and only 2% of the electricity that flows on the continent comes from renewable energies. In times of climate change, more and more politicians sense solar power means clean electricity, good headlines, prestige and investments for their countries. One of these politicians is Alassane Ouattara, the President of Côte d'Ivoire.

The climate in Côte d'Ivoire is tropical. But the further north you go, the drier it gets. This is where the solar potential of Côte d'Ivoire lies. And this is where Poro Power, the project of Aie and Bodain, is being built. Near the town of Korhogo, 140 hectares of savannah are being covered with solar cells. Roads are being constructed, a connection to the electricity grid, and accommodation for workers and technicians. In the middle of nowhere, an industry is growing because of the dream of two men who had no idea about solar energy for a long time.

Aie and Bodain were born in Abidjan in the early 1980s. It was the last years of the Ivorian Miracle, a time of prosperity and stability. Aie's mother was an entrepreneur, and Livane's father an engineer. Only 300 metres separated their homes. "I don't know when I met you," says Aie, and Bodain says, "You've always been there." In her memory, her childhood was like a Sepia-coloured record cover, happy days, the slap of basketball on the asphalt, the glitter of the lagoon. So, the 80s passed, the wonder faded and stopped. The Ivory Coast's descent began.

In the middle of Abidjan stands a skyscraper that was supposed to be a monument to the Miracle Ivoirian but became a memorial to its end, la Pyramid. The pyramid was completed in 1973, a mixture of Afrofuturism, megalomania and Aztec temple. Today it still looms over Abidjan like a spaceship, but one that crashed long ago. The windows are broken, and the façade is stained. No one has worked here for a long time, but there are traces everywhere; rooms full of yellowed pieces of paper, fox-stained documents – confetti of a dead bureaucracy. The walls are painted. *"On veut la paix,"* someone has written. "We want peace." In 2002, the first civil war broke out in Côte d'Ivoire, and the fighting lasted two years. Calm returned briefly; then, the conflict flared up again in 2011. Gunshots echoed through Abidjan, and many people fled into the pyramid.

Aie and Bodain followed the decline of their country from afar. Bodain went to France after school, studied in Paris and became a computer scientist at IBM. Aie left Côte d'Ivoire even earlier. He moved to the US, attended high school and wanted to be a basketball player. "Sometimes we felt like traitors," he says. "We were safe, and our families were at war." Aie was a good basketball player; once he had the ball, he never gave it back. But it wasn't enough for a professional career. He left the USA, moved to Canada and studied politics. And there, at the University of Quebec, he heard about solar energy for the first time. He attended seminars, studied and fell in love with the idea of solar energy. It was the future, and Aie wanted to play. It was like playing basketball. He knew he just had to keep at it, and he would score.

In 2013 came Aie's first pitch, solar panels on the roofs of Canadian warehouses. It was a good idea, and many people had it. The government's funding programme had 25 000 applications. The wait for a response alone was two and a half years. There was no room for Aie's plans. At least not here, so, once again, let the ball come, catch it, hold on to it and then the second throw. In 2013, Canada was 99% electrified, but Côte d'Ivoire only 43%. "You don't have to be a genius," says Aie, "to copy at home what works elsewhere."

When Aie started looking for partners in Canada to build an Ivorian solar power plant, it was not a month before he had several interested parties. Among them was Canadian Solar, one of the largest operators of solar plants in the world. Aie flew home to Abidjan and pitched his project to an old friend. "After only three minutes," Bodain says, "I was in."

In Canada, the friends convinced the development department of Canadian Solar. In Côte d'Ivoire, they worked their way through the ministries. Then the Canadian government got involved. Suddenly there was talk of millions and megawatts. In 2016, after two and a half years, the Ivorian government signed an official declaration of intent, a solar power plant was to be built in Korhogo, and the state would buy the electricity. So far, Aie and Bodain had not earned a cent. They slept at home again on their mothers' sofas. Canadian Solar said, "We'll pay you off. We'll take it from here," Aie and Bodain said, "No, thank you."

"We didn't do it just for us," says Aie. "But for our country," says Bodain. They sit in their office in Abidjan, 15 square metres filled by the two men and a map of Côte d'Ivoire. "So many projects are run by foreigners," says Aie, "too few by Ivoirians." It was a brave decision – and a dangerous one. After the Canadians pulled out, the two had a contract with the government but no partner. They had a project worth millions without millions, a hypothetical power plant, but no one to build it.

"They found us on the internet," says Zino Fleck, "and simply called us." Fleck is based in Tauberbischofsheim, in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, 5000 kilometres from Abidjan. Here there is a half-timbered old town and 25 music and singing clubs. Fleck has been building and operating solar plants here for 20 years. Although not only here, "I have lost my heart to Africa," he says. His WhatsApp profile picture shows him riding a quad bike through the terrain, a Swabian middle-class man with silver hair and a spirit of adventure. Fleck's company, Tauber Solar, has already built a power plant in Mauritius and tried it in other countries. In Burundi, he had a contract with the government. Then came the civil war. In Ghana, he had a plot of land. Then came the politicians. Fleck wanted to go to Angola, but the Chinese came with suitcases full of money. “They are openly corrupt,” he says, but when a man from Côte d’Ivoire called him in Tauberbischofsheim, he was still immediately interested.

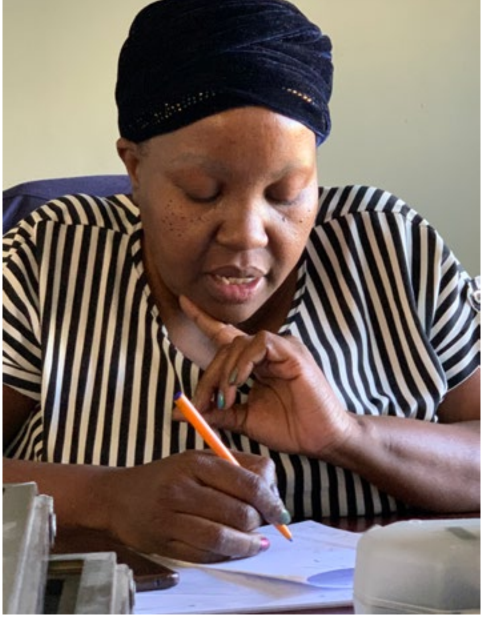
Deals like this are all about trust. Trust means jumping and believing that someone will catch you. It also means respect. Two weeks after the first phone call, Fleck flew to Abidjan. Then he drove with Aie and Bodain to the hot north. The three of them stood in the middle of nowhere where their power plant would stand one day, two Ivoirians and a Swabian. “The Germans,” says Aie, “met us as equals right from the start.” “In the end, it’s a handshake deal,” says Fleck, “you look each other in the eye and decide: we’ll do it.”

Poro Power’s total investment costs €94 million, 30 million of which is equity from Tauber Solar and a co-investor from Madagascar. The rest comes from a loan from DEG, the international arm of KfW. KfW wants to invest €100 billion in the global energy transition over the next five years. Poro Power fits perfectly into the programme, a solar power plant with local partners and a company from Swabia.

Anyone who builds a photovoltaic system needs a great deal of capital, much land and even more patience. It will take 10 to 12 years for Poro Power to pay for itself. The construction time alone is two years. Ship, rail and road have to bring 250 000 solar panels to Côte d’Ivoire in 900 containers. The technology is produced by a German company, ABB Photovoltaik, but it is built in China and Vietnam.

In July 2021, the international parts will land at the port of Abidjan. Then 900 containers will be loaded from ships onto 18 goods trains. Poro Power’s solar parts will roll through the country in a train caravan from the south to the north, 570 kilometres away. Aie and Bodain will be at the port when the containers arrive. They will follow the trains on their way north, through the whole country, while the green bush slowly turns yellow, and the sun becomes increasingly glaring. They will help load the trucks when all the containers must be transported the last 50 kilometres by truck. They will swear and give commands; they will supervise the construction in Korhorgo, watching panel by panel as their dream comes true until 140 hectares of solar cells shine grey in the sun.

“For so long, all this was only in our heads,” says Bodain, “and now it’s happening.” By January 2023, the plant should be up and running. And then? “Once you start,” says Aie, “you always want more.” Sparks create fires; electricity creates industrialisation and the life that goes with it. If you have a fridge, you also want air conditioning, a washing machine and television – more leads to more. Sino Fleck says, “There are already pre-contracts for Poro Power 2, 3 and 4.” Progress is hungry. “We are just getting started,” says Aie. “The future of solar is in Africa.”



Tebogo Mositio, Ditsogo Projects, South Africa

Rustenburg. That is the name of the town we are going to. We drove here from Johannesburg, for two hours, in a micro-hired car, heavy trucks overtaking us repeatedly. The name means ‘place of rest’ in Afrikaans, and when we reach the outskirts of the city, there is indeed nothing going on. The landscape here has a brutal openness. For kilometres, you look out over boulder-grey. Skeletal fingers of old industrial plants loom behind fences. The land looks as if it has been dug up and filled, which is exactly what happened in part.

Just a few metres below the ground lies the Merensky Reef containing a layer of igneous rock, the largest platinum deposit on earth. Rustenberg is home to two of the world’s most productive platinum mines. Mining provides half of all jobs in the region. Like many mining areas, Rustenburg is a tough, calloused-hands area with old industry and shrinking prospects.

We came here to meet a woman who is supposed to be the future amid this rusty past. Tebogo Mosito is 41 years old and head of Ditsogo Projects. Her company makes steel products for the mines, rails, beams and hoppers. Mosito does old-school industry, with welding machines, spark showers and steel-toed boots. Only she does it as one of the very few women in the business – always difficult. Even more difficult as one of the few blacks, especially in South Africa.

Tebogo is standing on the street in front of her factory, a small, round woman who waves at us with both hands. She is wearing a fleece jacket over a black-and-white striped T-shirt and a black turban on her head. Behind her rises Ditsogo’s factory, red brick production halls, corrugated iron roofs and car parks for trucks. We enter a large hall and into metal-filtered twilight. Our footsteps cast echoes. Above us, the sun glitters through holes in the roof.

“Sorry,” says Mosito, “sorry, sorry, sorry.” She wants to justify herself for this old factory she is still renovating. All this is just the beginning. But still, sorry, and she is also sorry that it is so cold. But that’s not her fault. Sorry. Tebogo has something erratic about her, the subliminal lack of concentration of someone who sleeps too little. She has four children, is a single parent and runs a steel factory. Tebogo yawns. “Sorry.” Suddenly she laughs, loud and radiant. There is a flash of another woman. Wit and self-irony and the knowledge of how absurd it is that she has to stand here again for the future.

Time and again, Tebogo was reported on, and CNN even put her on US television: “South Africa’s Woman of Steel.” The story behind it is always the same, a young, black woman in the old, white male mining sector. Tebogo is supposed to be the future, nothing less. She has that in common with her country – much was also expected of South Africa after the end of apartheid by people all over the world. Perhaps too much. Tebogo’s company has long fulfilled these expectations. Ditsogo was one of the fastest-growing companies in the industry. Tebogo created jobs and changed their sector a bit.

“Here,” she says, pointing to the factory gate, “is where steel will be delivered.” Over there, showers are to be installed for workers. Tebogo already sees welding equipment flaring up, a crane, brand new for her new factory. She has applied for a loan from the South African Development Bank for the renovation, R12 million, €700 000. Whether she gets it will be decided in these weeks. Her chances are good; she meets all the important criteria. She is a black woman, and she comes from the area.

Tebogo Mosito was born in 1981 in a small village in the country around Rustenburg. The houses were plain and made of concrete; in their gardens, people grew cassava and maize. Tebogo’s mother was a cleaner; her father drove a taxi. Money was scarce – village life in apartheid South Africa. Those who grew up here had limited career options. Men became drivers or went into underground mining. Women became cashiers in Rustenburg’s supermarkets or served guests at Sun-City, a casino-hotel-leisure complex that still exists today. Nothing new ever happened. Then Tebogo turned 13, and 1994 came.

The end of apartheid was a historical turning point, like the fall of the Berlin Wall or the end of fascism. Nelson Mandela became the country’s first black president. And around the world, this excitement rolled: South Africa, free at last! Only a two-hour drive from Mosito’s village was one of the epicentres of this revolution, Johannesburg and Soweto. The township’s name became synonymous with the freedom struggle. Almost all the greats, Mandela and Desmond Tutu, had lived here. Cyril Ramaphosa, the current president of South Africa, also played on the streets of Soweto as a child. A poor neighbourhood became world famous, and it was just around the corner from Tebogo’s home.

“In our village,” she says, “nothing changed.” 1994 came and went. The houses remained small, the people poor. Tebogo could have gone to another school now, one that white children also attended, but there was no such school here. The revolution swept across the country, but everything remained as it had always been in Rustenburg and surrounding areas. Only in Tebogo’s mind had something changed. The world seemed more accessible to her now. “I had big plans,” she says. She would never have thought that, 20 years later, these plans would lead her back here again, to the mines, to Rustenburg.

We sit in her office. It is cold here too. A window doesn't close properly; the door is crooked. That, too, is supposed to change in the next few months – when the loan comes through. Until then, the view from the office is of cracked concrete, where the crane stands and the extension that is to become a canteen. Behind it, you can see the vast countryside in the distance.

Mining has always been the driving force here. "Rustenberg is where 70% of all the platinum in the world comes from," Tebogo says and simultaneously writes it on a piece of 70%! That's a habit of hers; she draws along. Then she explains her business to us and scribbles along, like a real-time PowerPoint show. A triangle with four small circles: a hopper. Strokes, cross-connections: a steel frame. "My biggest client," Tebogo says, "is Impala Platinum." Impala has 50 000 employees and turns over more than €2 billion annually. Compared to that, Ditsogo is very small, a cleaner fish next to a whale. In 2020, Ditsogo made just R7 million in turnover, a scant €500 000. Now, when business is almost at a standstill because of the move to the new factory, Tebogo has only 12 permanent employees. Before, in the good times (she draws an arrow upward), her company turned over more than R12 million. Things have been better for Tebogo, true for the whole industry.

During Apartheid, mining was South Africa's most important industrial sector, but the economy has diversified since 1994. VW, BMW, Mercedes and Toyota build cars in South Africa. The financial sector turns over US$40 billion annually. Ten per cent of all jobs depend on tourism, the wine tours through Stellenbosch, the safaris and the Table Mountain sunset. Alongside this, mining is looking increasingly pale. Between 2010 and 2018, the yield from the mines fell by 10% and, by 2019, only accounted for just under 9% of GDP. This was due to a lack of innovation, poor electricity supply, port infrastructure and rail networks.

"Everything used to feel different," says Tebogo. Like the future. But maybe only because her own life was just beginning at that time. She left her village in 2000, moved to Johannesburg and studied business administration. She liked 'Joburg' and enjoyed all the people in the big city after a childhood in the country. Most of all, Tebogo enjoyed her studies. She did her bachelor's degree and would have liked to do a Master's. "Education is everything," she says.

Tebogo slides a photo over, showing her arm in arm with a young man; they are both laughing. "You know the story," she says. Everything is typical. Sometime during this Johannesburg student life, she had met him, her guy. She fell in love, dated a bit, fell pregnant and they got married. Tebogo was 21 years old and could no longer afford a master's degree at university. So, she started working for her husband in his workshop, a steel work company. Business was good. The one child quickly became three, the company grew, also thanks to Tebogo's ideas, and at some point, she took over the management.

Tebogo won a competition for small entrepreneurs, R180 000 for the company and six weeks of training on the steel milling machine at Trumpf in Pforzheim. She left her husband at home with the children and flew to Germany. "Pforzheim was a bit boring," she says and laughs. But it was worth it; she could now mill and was ready for the next step in her career. She thought she had her life under control.

When Tebogo returned, her husband had spent all the money on alcohol and prostitutes, left the children alone and almost ruined the business. Things had been difficult between the couple before, but now it was catastrophic. He became violent and drank. Then came the drugs, nightly rages, and more violence. “I was afraid he would kill me,” she says. She divorced him, took her children and pawned her iPhone, which was all she had left. She bought bus tickets from the proceeds and returned to Rustenburg, to her home in her parents’ village.

Today, almost ten years later, Tebogo sits in her office, where everything is again in upheaval and tells her story without embellishment. “That’s just the way it was,” she says. “Why hide anything?” Just as honestly as she talks about her ex-husband, she talks about business. What is Ditsogo’s margin? “25%.” Is that good? “Not really. The big guys make 35%, but we can’t scale like that.” Still, for all that, she is not immodest. Tebogo has won awards with Ditsogo for the fastest growing SME in the industry and the advancement of women. But she also knows she had help. “I am good,” she says, “yes – but I am also black.”

Black economic empowerment (BEE) is what Tebogo is talking about. BEE is perhaps the most serious economic legacy left after almost 30 years of ANC rule. BEE is the reason South Africa’s economy works the way it does and one of the reasons it so often does not work. Yet the idea was simple and noble. Decades of Apartheid had made white South Africans rich. There were millionaires, billionaires, captains of industry and corporate bosses; none were black. The government wanted to change that. That’s why it introduced BEE in 2003; a series of regulations aimed at giving more black South Africans a share in economic success. BEE now stipulates the proportion of black South Africans on company boards, in the workforce, among shareholders and new hires. BEE is the quota regulation of all quota regulations, and those who do not follow it do not participate in government tenders and no longer get contracts and no licences.

The ratings made some black South Africans rich overnight. Cyril Ramaphosa is one of them; he owes much of his fortune to a BEE-imposed shareholding in several mining companies. But the wealth gap in South Africa is as extreme as ever. Few are wealthy, many are poor, and only the skin colours have changed (a little). Above all, however, the quota system was one thing, a gateway for corruption. Friends, family and party comrades were given posts. The political elite took over the economy. BEE applied not only to corporations but to all businesses in the country, so the regulations spread chaos. Hardly anyone except the South African government still thinks BEE is a good idea. The Economist calls the regulations “a euphemism for crony capitalism.” In 2015, the French economist, Thomas Piketty, said that income inequality in South Africa is, in some cases, higher today than it was during Apartheid.

Tebogo knows all this. She has no illusions about South Africa’s economy or politics. “But without BEE,” she says, “I would never have got my foot in the door.” In 2015, she founded Ditsogo in Rustenburg. She had no contacts and was new to the business. However, she could work with steel, knew how to run a business and, above all that, she was needed. Mining has been going on in Rustenburg for more than a hundred years. An old industry that means old and medium-sized companies in family hands, often in the second, third or fourth generation. And almost all these companies had and have the same problem; the bosses are white. Politicians put pressure on them, and BEE regulations were pulled. The mines that mined the world's platinum needed suppliers for their scorecards who were black and preferably female, young and local. Tebogo met all the criteria. So, she teamed up with a (white) medium-sized steel producer. She used the production halls, the equipment and, in the beginning, the workers of her partner. In return, she brought in the orders. BEE Level 1, a symbiosis. They shared the proceeds; Tebogo got 30% and her partner 70%. She did that for a year. By then, she had saved enough; she got her hall and was independent again.

But even now, self-employed and with her factory, she continues to benefit from South Africa's BEE. Her skin colour and gender are competitive advantages when awarding contracts. Tebogo is now the Business Development Director of a much larger company for which she does not work full time. That company approached her in 2019. AME, as the company is called, trades in, manufactures and services mining equipment. The group is a big ship with 7000 customers in South Africa, including all the mines in Rustenberg. However, AME only had BEE level six. As with school grades, six means very bad or, in this case, too white. So, AME founded a subsidiary for the Rustenburg region. They offered Tebogo a position, a seat on the board and shares in the newly established company. Since then, AME has been able to announce on its website: "[We] include a 30% black-female-owned enterprise development initiative that supports the government's objectives for the development of previously disadvantaged individuals." This raised the company's BEE level from six to two. This type of operation is typical in South Africa, an alchemy of shareholders until it fits.

When Tebogo talks about it, she looks unhappy. She doesn't want to be a token face. "I'm not just any name," she says, "I'm good at my job." But when AME made the offer, she could not turn it down. "I needed the money for my own company," she says. She uses the BEE dividend to invest in Ditsogo. She says, "I'm just working double time now. I have become AME's business developer." She is silent and looks tired. Then she says, "I'm not going to sell my soul. I'm not comfortable with this deal."

On the way back, Tebogo drives a few kilometres ahead of us. We follow her pickup in our small car. The sun has set, and the land is now blue. At some point, Tebogo says goodbye to us, sets the indicator, lowers the window and waves. Then she turns off. We drive back towards Johannesburg, where a revolution once took place.

Nomvula Mhambi, Disruptive Innovation (among others), Zimbabwe

Nomvula Mhambi was born in 1988. The first important point in her story is the year of her birth. Because 1988 was eight years after the end of Rhodesia. The president was Robert Mugabe, and Zimbabwe was officially free. That is why Nomvula's generation is called Born Frees. The children of the 80s were the first not to be born under white rule. The future should belong to them.

Nomvula's mother was called Molly. She was a cook and ran canteens in Harare. Nomvula followed her everywhere. She found nothing more fascinating. All the pots, pans, and strainers. Sweet-smelling things. Couverture! When Nomvula was five, she could say 'chocolate éclair'. At eight, she could bake some herself. That was her childhood, sheltered, warm. It was the 90s. Outside, in front of Molly's house, was suburbia: small gardens, concrete walls, neighbours who knew each other. In between, many little Nomvulas in colourful dresses played on the streets of Harare. Yes, a Born Free elite could have grown up in such a neighbourhood. Maybe they would have taken their country forward. Everything would have been different.

As Nomvula approached the end of her school years, nothing was left of the money her mother had set aside for her studies. Inflation had eaten it up. This was the first time Nomvula had been cheated by her country, and it was not the last. Despite the obstacles Zimbabwe has put in her way and the many sticks between her legs, Nomvula has become an entrepreneur who does everything, prevails over everything and, in the end, almost always wins.

Business number one: Catering

"You should go away," her mother said. Out of Zimbabwe, even better out of Africa. Nomvula had family in England and could have gone there. Even though almost all her school friends had left the country, Nomvula did not want to go. The Born Frees fled the lack of opportunities. "But I didn't want to leave my mother alone," Nomvula says. So, she stayed and founded her first company at 18, Ambience, a catering company.

"There are ghost writers," Nomvula says. "I became a ghost cook." The wealthy elite lived on the outskirts of Harare in very British mansions with shaved lawns. They lived well there "…but they couldn't cook," Nomvula says. That had to be covered for; someone had to be hired secretly. Word of Nomvula's talent had spread among the rich who could not cook. They called Nomvula before cocktail evenings and canapé parties. She cooked in their kitchens, served and disappeared in time for dinner. Sometimes guests would already be arriving at the front while Nomvula was still cleaning up at the back. Then she would hear heels clattering. Kisses left, kisses right. "You cooked all this? Unbelievable."

When Nomvula was 20 years old, she already had three employees. She earned money and paid her way to study business management at a university abroad. Ambience took off. Nomvula's biggest gigs were the basketball and cricket games in Harare. Sports fans in Zimbabwe – like sports fans everywhere in the world – are thirsty for a beer before the game and hungry for things from the grill afterwards. That's what Nomvula delivered. During the week, she cooked Beef Wellington for rich housewives; her grills smoked outside the stadium in Harare's eternally pale sky over weekends. "I had big plans," Nomvula says. However, she also knew more and more caterers were squeezing prices. It was time for a second leg to stand on.

Business number two: Event planning

Nomvula cooked for company, private and other parties. She always noticed that her food was good ("It was amazing," Nomvula says), but everything else was rather mediocre ("Absolute chaos"). The decoration lacked concept; the music did not make anyone dance. Nomvula was sure she could do balloons, DJs and guest lists and become a party planner. Party planning was a phrase from US television, it was a worldwide thing, but no one was doing it in Harare. The niche was vacant, and so Ambience Catering became Ambience Event Management.

Nomvula planned everything except weddings. "I don't have the diplomatic flair for that," she says, "I'm not good at family arguments." She quickly took over events in nightclubs and bars. She managed small concerts and release parties for musicians. On the side, the catering continued, the barbecue stations in front of the stadium, and the dinner events. Parties with 50 guests turned into parties for 500. Her reputation preceded her, and she worked around the clock. When she was 21 years old, the scene knew her name. In September 2010, the time had come. Her phone rang, her name had reached the very top and the big concert was coming.

Business number three: Entertainment

In the beginning, there were two men. One had become rich in oil and gas, the other in the security business. Together they founded a company for stadium-sized events, Zim Swag. Zim Swag hired security guards, logisticians, technicians and Nomvula Mhambi as stage manager. They rented the Harare sports arena and booked two superstars, R&B singer Akon from the USA and dancehall musician Sean Paul from Jamaica.

Zim Swag wanted it extravagant. A VIP dome was to be set up in the stadium, loudspeakers hanging from steel girders, lighting systems casting beams into the audience. "None of this exists in Zimbabwe," Nomvula told the Zim Swag bosses. "Let's work with local companies." However, they did not listen. Instead, everything was to be imported from South Africa, 60 tons of equipment, ordered just a week before the event. Two days later, it was clear the freight would not come. The containers were stuck at customs. Akon landed in Harare, Sean Paul too, both with an entourage. The stadium was empty, with no stage, dome or speakers, and there were only 48 hours to go. "This," said Akon's manager, "is not how we perform." At three in the morning, Nomvula's mobile rang. It was the bosses of Zim Swag, "Didn't you say something about local companies?"

Nomvula had a stage built, which somehow reassured the journalists. With 24 hours to go, she checked in 15 supporting bands and had a buffet set up backstage. Everyone in the stadium turned to her, technicians, security and the musicians. Twelve hours to go, it became morning, noon and afternoon. It became 3 pm; it should have started, but the musicians were not in sight. Around the stadium, the crowd was seething. You could hear them roaring, hooting, and shaking the fence. Then the police said the security fence had to be taken down; it was not authorised. They tore it down, and the crowd spilt into the stadium. Security was out of the question. The backstage manager collapsed. She lay crying, surrounded by extra-expensive Fiji mineral water bottles that had been flown in for Akon. "So," Nomvula says, "I took over."

She raced to the hotel, grabbed the stars' managers, and dragged them to the stadium. She was everywhere. She directed the security team. She sent out the support bands and decided who had to share which instrument with whom. Now! Strobe lights! Drums! Electric guitars! Bass amps! The audience celebrated. And then, at midnight, the stars took the stage. First Akon played, then Sean Paul, then both together. It became the biggest concert ever held in Zimbabwe.

After that evening, Nomvula was considered a prodigy in the entertainment industry. Anyone who had anything to say in Zimbabwe had seen her there, on stage, in the audience, in front of the fence, with the bosses, at the front, at the back. From now on, when prominent musicians came to the country, Nomvula organised the concerts. After Akon and Sean Paul came Lil Kim, DJ Scratch, Fat Joe and UB 40. Nomvula rented an office and hired assistants and a manager for the numbers. After two years, she had had enough. It was time for something new.

Business number four: Disruptive innovation

Nomvula never had any illusions about her country. She drove through Harare and saw a broken city, poverty and systemic failure. She went to demonstrations; she wanted to make a difference, to change things. So, in 2012, when she was 24, she quit her job and ended a stellar career. She founded a new company, Disruptive Innovation, a marketing agency. "But not a classic one," Nomvula says. "I didn't want to make over the mistakes of any companies." Disruptive Innovation specialised in the social responsibility campaigns of large corporations and the public relations work of aid organisations.

More than one thousand NPOs and NGOs are active in Zimbabwe, with tens of thousands of employees with good intentions. However, this 'wanting to help' partly follows rigid communication concepts abroad. How do you tell a woman what her husband is doing to her is abuse when she has suffered so far without a word? How do you talk to children about AIDS? How do you do sexual education? The answer far too often is with (more or less embarrassing) cartoon booklets, printed T-shirts, radio and TV advertisements. All this often misses the target group because it is abstract and comes from outside. NGOs need help, especially regarding communication in rural areas; they need marketing for their good causes.

Nomvula's company followed two approaches. First, the message must come from the neighbourhood. People are like that; they are likelier to listen to a friend than to a T-shirt. Second, educational messages must have added value beyond their content, for example, events, parties and music. Disruptive Innovation worked for dozens of NGOs within a year, including Care International and Oxfam. Nomvula used her connections. She had children perform theatre in their neighbourhood and educated them about HIV in the play. She did not give out comic books; she made them draw. She did not give away T-shirts; she had them designed. She brought marketing, art and the good cause together, and the NGOs got an audience.

This work made Nomvula known beyond Zimbabwe. The concert with Akon was her national breakthrough; this was her international breakthrough. Forbes Africa put her on its 30-under-30 list. In 2014 Nomvula flew to America, attended seminars as a Mandela Washington Scholar, made contacts, and flew to Washington DC to the President. Nomvula shook hands with Barack Obama. Michelle was there too. "Life changing," Nomvula says. When she came back, she formulated a new idea. It was the next business she wanted to start, and it became her most challenging.

Business number five: WASH

Nomvula had hardly spent a day at home since turning 18. She worked day and night for the whole month. Although, no, not the entire month. "When you had your period," Nomvula says, "all you could do in Harare was stay at home." There were no restaurants with clean bathrooms in the city centre, hardly any place to wash your hands. That's how Nomvula came up with her idea of free public toilets. Nomvula's concept was simple, build toilets and rent out the walls as advertising space, like advertising pillars, where people can wash.

Nomvula had this idea before; it had been one of many pitches in Disruptive Innovation's marketing arsenal – toilets as part of corporate responsibility for large corporations. Nomvula had gone to Unilever with it, but they were not interested. However, when Nomvula returned from the USA, she found that Unilever had implemented her idea without her. Nomvula sued the company, it went to court, and there the case stayed. It is still there today, seven years later. The municipality banned Nomvula's concept because the case was not settled. Public toilets with advertising funding were dead. In the critical places, in the middle of the city, where there is a great deal of traffic, where thousands have to wash, there was still no toilet. The Unilever toilets were somewhere else.

The 19th of November is World Toilet Day, and on World Toilet Day in 2015, Wash opened its first facility. Instead of advertising, they now sold detergent for 50 cents a pack. The location was Harare's central bus station, a giant grey square with cars, crowds and dust. Nomvula's sanitation facility transformed the place. Food vendors could wash, were in a better mood, and sold more food. Bus drivers washed between shifts. The stench subsided, and Nomvula expanded. One container became three; showers were added to the toilets. A kiosk opened with sanitary towels, tampons and handkerchiefs. Wash's location became so big that Nomvula hired a staff of a manager, two security guards, and six women cleaners. All financed by 50-cent laundry detergent bags. This success would have had to be repeated elsewhere, but not in Harare. What Nomvula was doing displeased the administration, and the city took them to court.

She was told she had violated conditions, but she did not know which ones. She did not have the licence, but she had it in black and white. She was not allowed to sell detergent, but that was not true either. "I was lucky," Nomvula says. "The judge was a woman." She asked, "Is the city of Harare seriously going to sue this young woman for building a toilet?" Nomvula won the case, but the authorities did not let up. Again and again, police, threats, controls. "If you don't pay here, you'll be cut down, no matter what," Nomvula says. While she was not allowed to expand, Unilever continued to open toilets. At one point, the company had 15. Nomvula narrowly avoided having her site taken away from her too, to go to Unilever. "I fought for every toilet," Nomvula says, and today, Wash has two facilities in Harare from which she has earned nothing. However, Wash was not meant for that either; Nomvula had other companies.

Business number six: Trends Beauty Salon

When she was seven years old and later as a teenager, Nomvula used to model in TV commercials. She enjoyed the slick feeling of clothes that had never been worn, being made up, and the tug on her scalp when her hair was braided. Fingernails are also great, especially when they are long and glittery. No wonder Nomvula decided at some point to open a beauty salon.

In 2018, Nomvula opened Trends Hair & Nails. She flew in stars from South Africa for the opening. Boity, a famous rapper, had her hair and nails done. The salon was immediately booked up, Harare's coolest beauty salon. For a year and a half, the shop did exceptionally well. Nomvula employed ten people. Customers booked months in advance. Then, again, the problems started. It started with the female employees, who wanted to be paid in US dollars. The newly established local currency lost value, and inflation was back to 700%. The clients continued to pay in local money, British pounds, South African Rands or Eco Cash, the country's mobile money service. Then the government fixed the exchange rates, from RTGS dollars to US dollars. The banks had their rates, and the black market had the best. Nomvula kept the books in four currencies and under conditions of constantly fluctuating exchange rates. "We were losing money even though we were booked out," Nomvula says. She was forced to realise that Zimbabwe's financial system was just too broken for a hair salon.

Business number seven: Mushroom farms

Nomvula likes mushrooms, but she rarely eats them because mushrooms are expensive in Zimbabwe. They must be imported from the neighbouring countries of Zambia and South Africa. That is completely unnecessary, they could grow in Zimbabwe, but nobody grows them. That's why Nomvula got into the mushroom business.

She leased a piece of land outside Harare and built greenhouses for mushrooms. They like it dark and cool and need air conditioning in summer. Nomvula invested US$ 50 000 in the farm, and the business took off. She produced 500 pallets of mushrooms every week with eight employees. Her mushrooms cost half as much as the imported ones, and supermarkets and restaurants scrambled for them. The demand was so great that she could never satisfy all her customers. Nomvula planned more mushroom houses and already saw mushroom millions. Then the farm's electricity supply collapsed because the public transformer had blown. Nomvula went to the authorities, but they would not help. "We'll only fix it if you pay US$12 000." That was the end of the mushroom farm.

So Nomvula switched to Portobello mushrooms. They can be produced in larger quantities without air conditioning. The same chain began again: cultivation, success, enthusiastic supermarkets, growth potential. Then came the same disaster. Only this time, it was not the electricity supply that broke down but the water. Nomvula waited for months, but the authorities did nothing, and the whole neighbourhood remained without water. In 2020, after three years, Nomvula ended her career in the mushroom sector. Since then, the mushrooms in Harare's supermarkets have been once more imported and are expensive. In Nomvula's cellar, cultivation boxes for mushrooms are stacked next to hairdryers and hairdresser sinks.

The next steps

We meet Nomvula in the summer of 2021. She is a tall woman, certainly 1.80m, with blonde-dyed pigtails down to her hips and a voice like a radio star, deep and sage-velvety. She laughs a lot, always loud and enthusiastic, as if at a dirty joke. She drives an ageing green E-class Mercedes and says, "German cars make an impression on business partners." We drive through Harare with her and see the stadium where Akon played, in front of which there is now much homelessness; the clubs where Nomvula organised parties; the toilets of Wash. Nomvula is 33 years old. She has worked her way across this city for the last 15 years, trying everything to succeed. “Wash and Disruptive Innovation are still going strong and will continue to do so,” Nomvula says. “But they will have to do it without me in the future.”

Nomvula leaves, capitulating to Zimbabwe, the corruption, the permanent crisis, the broken structure and the money mismanagement. Like her classmates before her, she leaves the country, another Born Free who wants to be free elsewhere. “It breaks my heart,” she says. Then she makes a bitter speech: “We are the born frees, yes. That’s what we are called. But what do we get out of it? My grandparents were oppressed by white people. They were unfree, oppressed. But they had health insurance, the schools were good, and they got pensions. They had two houses. Two! On a teacher’s salary and a social worker’s salary. And what do I have? Existential angst.”

In 2022, Nomvula wants to move to the neighbouring country, Zambia. She is more than welcome there. Zambia lures entrepreneurs with tax giveaways, especially wants founders who go into agriculture. Nomvula has already bought a piece of land. She wants to start a mushroom farm and also intends to grow garlic. Then the whole chain that goes with it, dried mushrooms, mushroom powder, ready-made soups, garlic granulate. It’s easy to export from Zambia to neighbouring countries, even Zimbabwe. That’s what Nomvula wants to do. “And who knows?” she says, “maybe other things.” It will be possible to set up a few companies, at least one, two, three, four, five, six or seven different ones.

Julian Omalla aka Mama Cheers, Delight Uganda, Uganda

We were returning from Mama Cheer's mango farm when we got caught in a storm of butterflies. We had spent the day in the countryside near Gulu in northern Uganda, looking at all the beautiful mango trees, talking about fruit juice, and then decided to drive back in the evening. It was late at night, and our eyes were falling shut. That's when this sound started, a warm plop. Suddenly our car was covered by insects. Moths were dying with wriggling wings on the windscreen. We pulled over at a petrol station, a Shell; its orange glow attracted millions more moths. It took us a while to see children crawling all over the ground sweeping up the insects with hand brushes and stuffing them into bags. Later we found out that the moths are deep-fried and eaten. They taste slightly bitter, are crunchy and are considered a delicacy. So, Uganda is often, like this car trip, fabulous. "The whole country," a friend in Kenya had told us, "is like Africa in a movie from the 80s."

In Uganda, the past is a story yet to be told. While there, we witnessed the sixth inauguration of Museveni, the long-time ruler. We saw the capital cordoned off by police and military and a US pop star who had come to pay his respects to the president. We stayed in a hotel from whose garden the guests looked out over Kampala to Lake Victoria, clinking ice cubes. We listened to the president's daughter on a very balmy evening there. She praised Uganda's pineapples ("The best in the world…") and flirted with damming the Nile in a cocktail dress. It was a weird trip. It was also like a trip from the past, like a film, about Africa, from the 80s.

On the second day after our arrival, we sit in a taxi fighting through Kampala's traffic. The driver laughs when he hears our destination and says, "Of course, I know Mama Cheers. Everyone here does." We are here in Kampala, and this taxi because of her. Mama Cheers is the nickname of Julian Omalla, a juice producer and one of Uganda's most famous entrepreneurs. She owns a factory in Kampala and a mango farm in the countryside. She survived an assassination attempt and made it from market woman to CEO. Above all, for most people in Uganda, Mama Cheers is a childhood memory. "We all used to drink it," says the taxi driver, his face contorted. By used to, he means at school because Mama Cheers fruit juice was cheap and sweet and served from 10-litre canisters. It was part of the basic equipment of every school canteen and boarding school. “It used to be great,” says the taxi driver, “now it’s too sweet.”

Slowly he steers us through the traffic jam to the company headquarters. Trucks stagger through potholes. Campaign posters hang from poles and lampposts; the president in a white suit looks at his citizens. The presidential elections were only a few months ago. Uganda voted in January 2021, and Museveni, who has ruled the country since 1986, was confirmed in office with 58% of the vote. International observers doubt these figures. Police and military killed 50 protesters in the months before the election. The internet was shut down on the day of the vote, and Museveni’s challenger, musician Bobi Wine, had to spend election day under house arrest. As we drive to Mama Cheers, Museveni’s inauguration again is only days away. The president will continue to rule. An almost 80-year-old man rules over a population with the world’s youngest average age of 15.5 years. The past is stubborn in Uganda.

Delight Uganda is the name of Julien Omalla’s company. Trucks stand on red ground in the car park in front of the headquarters. Then a wall with a security gate, behind it the HQ. Omalla’s office is on the second floor, a large room with a balcony, pale yellow walls and a wooden shelf full of awards. We step inside and in front of the heavy desk. Mama Cheers rises, “Welcome.” She sinks back and looks at us in silence. She is used to being interviewed but is still reluctant to answer questions. Mama Cheers likes to keep control over her story. “Turn on the microphone,” she finally says and begins, “It was a humble and poor beginning.”

Julian Omalla was born in a typical Ugandan village with flat-roofed houses, a football field, a church and a school where her father was the headmaster. “He was respected everywhere,” she says. He had eleven children, a strict man and a responsible Christian. When they had problems, people came to him. “Sometimes we had 40 people at home,” Omalla says, “my parents fed the whole village.” She learned back then, long before she became Mama Cheers, that responsibility means taking care of people. When Omalla was growing up, Idi Amin ruled Kampala and destroyed his country. Between 300 and 400 000 people died during his eight-year rule. “When soldiers came to the village,” says Mama Cheers, “my father would hide us girls in the bedroom.” The men would ask for women. No, said Omalla’s father, none here, all gone already. Omalla, her sisters and cousins shivered in the next room, huddled in the shadows until it was over. “We hid and prayed.”

“I think,” says Julien Omalla. “That has guided my life. When you believe, your wishes come true. There is a time to act and a time to pray. I have a chapel here in the office. And when things are bad, I go and pray. I know how to pray. How to pray properly. How to get results.” We have been sitting in her office for an hour, and we have barely been able to ask a question. She conducts with her hand, and new characters keep appearing. Her son, Kilian, a quiet teenager, then an old acquaintance, a grey-haired senior, who praises Omalla’s influence in Uganda. Then the assistant bringing coffee, documents, press material and a cardboard display, a Ugandan Delight advertising poster. “Put it there,” Omalla says, “no, not there, there, exactly.” The display stands, and Omalla sits down in front of it. She is her own advertising figure, a woman in her late 50s in an orange-brown dress, Mama Cheers. “You may take photos,” she says. Then she leans back and lifts up as if to address the nation.

“I will take a step back and officially introduce myself. My name is Julian Adyeri Omalla. I am the CEO of Delight Uganda Limited. We produce juice and bottle it. This is our head office in Kawempe, Kampala. I am an entrepreneur, a wife, mother of three and grandmother of two. Yes. That’s how it is.” Yes, that’s how it is. Delight Uganda employs 350 people. Julian Omalla runs two factories and a fleet of trucks that distribute her product around the country. At the height of its success, the company held 60% of the juice market in Uganda and produced 12 000 litres of drinks a day for five million customers. But all that is in the past. “Cheers,” Omalla’s most successful brand, the sweet childhood memory juice, will no longer exist because Omalla is restructuring the company and changing its product and business model.

She is reacting to a new time with a new juice. Consumer behaviour is changing in Uganda, especially in Kampala, where more and more people want fresh instead of sticky, organic instead of concentrate and made in Uganda instead of imported from outside. Mama Cheers is reacting to this. She has bought almost seven square kilometres of land in northern Uganda, where she grows mangoes, citrus fruits and guavas. This is to become the juice of the future – and even more: new agriculture. Uganda’s north is poor and has been neglected for decades. There, where until recently a civil war, Julian Omalla is now training small farmers. More than 5000 farmers are already working with her. The Ugandan government supports the project. Professionals from Kenya help to grow the fruit. The United Nations honoured Omalla with an award for the advancement of women. It looks like her company is succeeding in something unUgandan as if Mama Cheers is leaving the past behind.

The next morning, we sit in our hotel. There is no sign of the chaos of the city here. Avocados grow next to the pool. Guests look out over the capital from white loungers to Lake Victoria. There is a family from Dubai with a fat son splashing in the pool. There are businessmen from Africa. There is a group of young, very fit Israelis. We listen to the interview with Mama Cheers. Then it’s noon, and suddenly the military moves into the hotel. Armed men block the entrances, buttons in ears everywhere, radio crackling. A convoy of cars pulls up, and Akon is there.

The day after tomorrow, President Museveni will be sworn in. And dignitaries from all over Africa have come to congratulate him. A few heads of state are there, Sahle-Work Zewde, the President of Ethiopia, Nana Akufo-Addo from Ghana and Uhuru Kenyatta from Kenya. But the festival is also attended by artists like Akon, who is staying at our hotel. Akon is a US R&B and rap musician with a Senegalese father. His albums have gone platinum, double platinum, and six times platinum. So, he is reasonably famous internationally. However, he is best known in Africa, not only because of his music. Akon has been drawing attention to himself with projects on the continent for a while. He runs an aid organisation for children, a diamond mine in South Africa and has his own cryptocurrency, “AKOIN” In Senegal, Akon wants to build a futuristic city. Although not much has happened there since the foundation stone was laid, he wants to repeat the whole thing in Uganda. So, the singer/city founder is a state guest. Streets are closed off for him. In the hotel, the staff are in a state of emergency: Americans everywhere! Men with gold chains bulldoze to the buffet. Women shriek with laughter at the bar. Cold wine flows in streams. The press and the people are not invited. Kampala has to stay outside.

A crowd of people now gathers in front of the hotel. Fans hope for autographs; policemen shoo them away. Motorbike taxi drivers wait for customers. There are street vendors, girls and women in colourful dresses. They are here and in almost every square in nearly every country on the continent. Millions of women in Africa try to feed their families this way. They buy their goods in the morning, make a pilgrimage through the cities, and earn their living water bottle by water bottle, cent by cent. Street vendors are omnipresent in Africa. And some people in the West make them the object of glorified theories. These women are micro-entrepreneurs, independently responsible for a business. Africa is, therefore, a continent full of entrepreneurs. The truth is these women lead a hard life, most of it on the streets. Hardly any of them manage to build something bigger. However, the few who outgrow the market stall are indeed some of the toughest businesswomen around, like Mama Cheers.

When Julian Omalla was 13 years old, she started working. She bought a plastic bowl to transport fruit and drink bottles which she went to sell. Every day for four years, she toddled up hills, down hills, in the sun, in the rain. She could not do anything else. Then she had a child. It was a life like millions of others. Little by little, she saved a little money that way. She rented a minibus and delivered to other shop assistants. She did not do it alone; she had a partner, a husband. He took care of the money and, at some point, took off with it. “Of course, I went after him,” says Mama Cheers. Her ex-partner had suspected this, hired killers and set them on her. “I only survived because I gave them everything I had left,” she says. “They killed three other women that night, but not me.” She stayed alive. “I had to start again from scratch.”

The day after Akon has checked into our hotel, we drive to Mama Cheer’s mango farm. Three men picked us up early in the morning in an off-road vehicle. Our passengers are two boys going north to work and Julian Omalla’s husband. Although it is still early in the morning, the roads are already crowded. Morning fog mixes with diesel smoke. It takes two hours, and then Kampala is behind us. The city becomes the outskirts, then the countryside. Soon we are driving through Uganda’s eternal green. Herds of cows whiz past us, women with pyramids of mangoes and pineapples, the eternal queues of school-uniformed children. Omalla’s husband rolls down the window. He breathes the humid air deeply. “Kampala is not Uganda,” he says. “This is Uganda.”

Only a quarter of the people in Uganda live in the cities. The rest live in villages like the ones we pass, cultivate the fields, and are at home in this country that Mama Cheer’s husband calls the real Uganda. The further north we drive, the smaller the villages become, the paler the facades, fewer cars, and more children. Northern Uganda is still scarred by war. Since the late 80s, Joseph Kony and his soldiers from the Lords Resistance Army (LRA) terrorised the country for almost 20 years.

They killed 100 000 people and displaced over a million. The LRA has been officially defeated since 2009, but the country is recovering only slowly. Julian Omalla speaks of an entire generation that has grown up in refugee camps, cannot read or write, has not learned a trade and thus has no way to free itself from poverty. That is precisely what she wants to give them with her mango farm. She leases their land and gives them seedlings. She teaches them how to cultivate the soil and grow fruit. She then buys them for her new juice. “People learn that a farmer does not have to be poor,” says Omalla. On the contrary. An acre of land properly cultivated can yield US$1800 per month, more than enough for a small family.

We are halfway to the farm when we cross the Nile River. Trees and bushes with leaves as fleshy and green as from a documentary about the time of the dinosaurs sprawl on the banks. The air is humid. Uganda is a fertile country. Whatever you sow grows. Agriculture is the most critical economic sector here and is responsible for 80% of exports and almost two-thirds of all jobs. It could be even more important because 80% of Uganda’s land could be used for agriculture, but only 30% is cultivated productively. The country is not called ‘the garden of Africa’ without reason. “The Future is in Fruits,” says Mama Cheers. It could be her motto in life.

Robbed and threatened, she restarted her career in the mid-90s. This time, she did not want to buy and sell but produce juice. Omalla got plastic bottles from Kenya. She mixed her own drink, initially 200 litres a day. In 1996, she founded her company and invented her first brand, Cheers Fruit Juice. However, this product had little to do with juice. It consisted of fruit concentrate, water and sugar and was hardly more fruit than Fanta. Agriculture in Uganda at that time was primarily small-scale. It was picking from trees and selling a few cartloads of fruit on the street for the next market. “No one produced enough to make juice out of it,” Omalla says. So, she had to import. An acquaintance supplied her with concentrate from the Netherlands, but most importantly, from Israel. Mama Cheers sat in the garden of Africa and processed fruit from a country in the desert. This sounds absurd, but it is classic. In many African countries, imported goods are still cheaper than local produce. However, for Julian Omalla, it paid off. Her business grew quickly, and Mama Cheers became a brand.

When we arrive at the farm, it is late noon. The plants are rain-soaked, and the sun breaks in thousands of droplets. We walk around the farm for two hours, picking fruit from the branches and sticking our fingers together with sap. Mango trees have a sturdy trunk and a broad crown that reaches almost to the ground. Between their dark leaves, the mangoes glow shades of lilac and rouge. While we walk around the farm, Mama Cheers tells us about the future. Everything is still new here, only three-square kilometres planted. In the future, Omalla wants to dominate the juice chain from here. She will have more farmers taught and lease the land. Even if a factory is to be built here, the scaffolding is already there. In future, the juice will not be pressed in Kampala but on-site at the farm. Another production step for Delight Uganda. Even more jobs for the North.

In the evening, we sit on plastic chairs in front of the farm’s main house. Mama Cheers has had the food cooked. There is grilled chicken, fried plantain and sour green vegetables. Everything comes from here. “This land,” says Julian Omalla, "is good to live on." Workers run across the square, children play, and girls bring plates, glasses, and fruit juice. Everything is moving, rotating, and hurrying. Only Mama Cheers sits in the middle like Mother Nature. She looks content. Then it gets dark. We have to leave. We have a long drive back and a storm of insects ahead of us.

A few days later, we are sitting in our hotel. The air is balmy, the pool glows blue, and Kampala glitters on its hills. Museveni's inauguration has taken place, and the streets of the capital have been unblocked. Akon wants to leave the next day, and the Americans are sitting on the terrace. A music group plays drums between the sun loungers by the pool. Then a woman rises. "Museveni's daughter," a waiter whispers to us. She starts to make a speech. First, she talks about Uganda's fruit, the best in the world, then about the country, the most beautiful in Africa, and its people, all happy and friendly. The Nile is proof of the latter, says the speaker. She tells of the Ethiopians who are building a dam. They would never do that in Uganda, take water away from other Africans, although they could, of course. It is a confused speech, but the Americans nod and clap. In the end, one man pays homage to Museveni: "He is our elder, he is our father. We're so happy he is here to ensure our wealth and future." Then the celebration ends. The Americans go to sleep; only we are still sitting outside. The night is velvet black; music is playing somewhere. Maybe we will go out again and get some fried butterflies from the garden of Africa. Uganda is like a film. It could be a good one, and maybe, at some point, the past will end.

Derek Littleton, Luwire, Niassa Reserve, Mozambique

"When I first came here," says Derek, "I thought, Jesus! This is paradise." It is the evening of our first day in Niassa Reserve. We sit on a mountain and look out over the national park. The Luganda River winds below us, and monkeys scream in the woods. It is getting dark, and the campfire crackles. Derek Littleton is the man whose company has been running this park for 20 years – trying to save it. Derek tells how he has fought poachers, defused mines, and defended paradise and how he finances his fight with tourism, philanthropy and hunting. We slip into our sleeping bags, fall asleep in a warm, peaceful place and have no idea that the end of paradise has already come.

Perhaps Mozambique is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. In any case, it is one of the most broken. Its history concerns the country's treasures and the desires they still arouse today. The Arabs came here as early as the eighth century. In 1498, Vasco da Gama landed on the coast. The Portuguese established plantations and traded slaves. It was not until 1975 that the country became independent and immediately plunged into civil war. When the war ended in 1992, Mozambique was one of the world's poorest countries and still is. Since 2017, another insurgency has shaken the country, this time in Cabo Delgado. In 2021, the Islamist terrorist militia, Al-Shabaab, took control of parts of the province. The state seems powerless; it cannot protect its population, let alone its nature.

Mozambique's government lacks the money for nature conservation and often the will. Therefore, preserving the land and protecting its animals falls mainly to private companies and foundations. There are now seven national parks and six large nature reserves. The largest is in the north of the country, twice the size of South Africa's Kruger National Park. This is the Niassa Reserve, the park Derek is fighting to preserve.

Derek is the co-founder and general manager of Luwire, which stands for Luganda Wildlife Reserve. Luwire runs part of the reserve, block L7, 4 500 square kilometres of wilderness, home to lions, leopards, elephants, antelope, buffaloes and hyenas. They are all protected by Luwire and cost a great deal of money for infrastructure, vehicles and the park's 120 employees. Money that does not exist.

It is the third day of our trip. We sit at breakfast and talk about disasters. Derek knows them well. He was born in Rhodesia in 1963, in Salisbury, now Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. “I had a fantastic childhood,” he says. “Never again have I experienced such cohesion.” Many white Rhodesians have these happy memories of their early lives. We heard this over and over again and always winced. From our point of view, Rhodesia was an unjust state where a white minority dominated the black population. But Derek saw in his childhood a country that worked and nature like a giant adventure playground. Rhodesia was his home, and as he grew older, that home collapsed.

Derek’s school was a boarding school called Plum Tree, with brick buildings, a cricket field, and school uniforms. “We were not South Africa,” Derek says. “There was no apartheid; the school was mixed.” The politics, however, were not. Although less than 5% of the population was white, the descendants of Europeans held power. This was bound to fail; it was only a matter of time. In the mid-70s, the civil war escalated in Zimbabwe and guns were issued in Plum Tree. Twice Derek and his classmates repelled attacks on their boarding school. “My definition of normality,” he says, laughing, “is probably a bit different from most people’s.”

Safari is a paradoxical idea, luxury holidays in the wilderness. Luwire has tents for safari tourists, four-poster beds with mosquito nets, charcoal stoves for hot water, and a launch site for mortar rockets “in case war comes to the park,” says Derek. There is a main house with ceiling fans, old books, cold beer and a pile of large-calibre weapons. Guests also want to drink cold wine in the bush, sleep softly, and feel safe. Safari is also one of the essential financing models for conservation. In 2019, the tourism industry in Africa turned over US$168 billion. Almost all tourists come for nature, the elephants and lions, for the sunset over the savannah. At least 50% of the money available to African national parks comes from tourism. “Without guests from outside, there would soon be no nature worth visiting,” says Derek.

During the weeks in the Niassa Reserve, we also live luxuriously. Our tent has three rooms and is fancier than most hotel rooms. Every evening we have dinner at a long wooden table, and as it gets dark and only the river glows at the end, as if it had stored the day in its water, Derek tells us about his life.

Once, he fell asleep by the campfire. He woke up when he was dragged at speed into the night. A lion had grabbed his sleeping bag and was pulling him away. “That was awesome!” Derek chased a crocodile through a town; he was drunk and chased the reptile to a pond on a golf course. Then he threw himself on it and rode it like a bull. “That was a feast!” Derek had a pet hyena. “She loved us but hated guests,” Derek says. Every visitor had to smack her with a baseball bat before entering the house. Derek had malaria, dengue fever and viral encephalitis and survived it all, unlike many others. Many of his stories end like that: a great guy, but then a crocodile ate him; a great guy, but then he got crushed by a hippo. “Man,” Derek says, “I knew a lot of good guys who aren’t alive today.”

Derek is almost 60 years old and still attractive, a slim guy who has never quite grown up. There are also days when Derek is serious. Then he sits on the camp terrace and buries his face in his hands. Something has gone wrong again; a car has broken down; something has been stolen or destroyed, or the money is missing. Managing this park is an almost impossible task. Derek has already had to give up once. He doesn't want that to happen to him again.

At 19, he graduated from Plum Tree boarding school. The civil war ended, Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, and Robert Mugabe took power. For Derek, this hardly mattered. He did not want to be in politics. He wanted to be in the bush, so he started working for the state national parks. He helped tourists get photos, and hunters get prey. However, the new rulers did not want any more whites in the civil service. So, in the 1980s, Derek started his own safari company. He leased a piece of land that was scarred by the civil war. He worked with the local people, defusing mines, driving out poachers and bringing in tourists to fund the park. Then the people in the region supported an opponent of Mugabe, and Derek's business was shut down. Mugabe, the freedom fighter, became a dictator, and Zimbabwe became poorer and poorer. Derek was desperate and did not know what to do next until he met a man without whom Luwire would not exist today.

When Derek met him, Adel Abdul Rahman Aujan from Bahrain was an Arab businessman worth almost half a billion US Dollars. His Aujan Group operated mines in the Middle East and Africa, trading in consumer goods, and made money in tourism, construction and security. In the mid-1990s, Aujan flew to Zimbabwe to hunt. "We became friends immediately," Derek says. When things got more challenging for him in Zimbabwe, Aujan took him aside. "Fly to Mozambique for me; look around there," he said, "maybe we can build something there."

So, in the summer of 1999, Derek drove from Harare to Pemba, on the coast of Cabo Delgado province. "The whole north lay fallow," says Derek. "There were only a few companies producing cotton and small outposts of the military." In the middle of it all was the Niassa Reserve, with all its plots of land, for which Mozambique's government was looking for operators. For a week, Derek walked through what was to become his home, Block L7. Then he wrote to Adel Aujan. "This is amazing but way too big for us." He thought that was the end of it, but Aujan called him less than a month later, "We got the contract."

A year later, in 2000, Aujan founded Luwire and made Derek the director. The land cost him US$15 000 annually. It was not the rent that made the project expensive; it was everything else. Aujan financed the construction of the infrastructure, the roads and the small tarmac runway for planes. In 2001, Derek trained the first scouts using people from the local population. This is still the case; most of Luwire's 120 employees come from Niassa. To this day, the staff is Luwere's biggest item, accounting for over half of all expenditure. In 2017, USAID estimated effective conservation would cost US$500 000 a year per 900 square kilometres in Mozambique. Luwire would need US$2.5 million annually. "We never had that much," says Derek. He and Aujan had the simple idea that their park should finance itself with safari tourism. However, Luwire has been failing for 20 years.

Problem one: Pemba, the city with the nearest airport, is 15 hours away by car.

Problem two: the weather. In Mozambique, there is a dry season and a rainy season. When it rains, the park is impassable; for six months, no one can get in or out. After the water has subsided, the grass shoots up. The green sea is beautiful to look at but terrible to cross. Like barbed wire, it slashes arms and legs. Above all, it hides the animals. Even a full-grown buffalo is only a rustle in the stalks. So, for half the year, the park is hardly usable for tourism and is difficult to reach the rest of the time. Goodbye, photo safari.

In his most successful years, Derek made just US$200 000 from safari tourism. The operation of the camps alone costs US$180 000 per year. From the beginning, it was clear to Luwire that more sources of money were needed. Derek travelled the world, met NGOs and collected donations. However, it was never enough, and if tourism and philanthropy are not enough, there is only one financing model left for nature conservation – hunting.

Big game hunters also travel to crisis areas, and they pay a great deal of money. Shooting one wild animal can bring in as much as a hundred photo safaris. It produces less waste than the entry and exit of hundreds of tourists, costs fewer resources and allows wilderness to remain wilderness. It sounds paradoxical to kill animals to save animals. However, it is consistent that, if nature is to finance itself, animals are part of its capital. For Luwire, hunting was the most important source of income early on. Hunters came to shoot buffalo, lions, leopards and antelope. In Luwire's best years, 15 hunters came yearly and earned the park US$700 000. That was just enough with the money from photo tourists and donations from abroad. In 2015, Luwire took in a total of US$1.5 million. Enough to pay the scouts and maintain the camps. It could have gone on like this had it not been for western society and its morals.

"Man, these people have no idea!" says Derek. Those people are the people in the West who mobilise against hunting, who call hunters murderers. They include stars like Ed Sheeran, Judy Dench and Ricky Gervais, who demand an end to trophy hunting, calling it "cruel and archaic." Their message is being heard because of the powerful symbols they can use. Symbols such as Cecil.

Cecil was a lion in Zimbabwe, a beautiful animal. Then Cecil was shot, and his death triggered a global controversy in 2015. Pictures of him adorned the Empire State Building, the hunter, a US dentist, was under police protection, and PETA called for his execution. Especially in the USA and Europe, millions of people saw confirmation of what they already knew – hunting is evil. Airlines banned the transport of trophies, countries their import. Some states in Africa banned big game hunting altogether, partly because of pressure from the West. At the time, Namibia's tourism minister said, "This will be the end of conservation in Namibia." Many scientists agreed with him. David Macdonald, a professor at the University of Oxford and one of the world's most renowned conservationists, said after Cecil's death: "Whether I like lion hunting is irrelevant. Trophy hunting helps keep hundreds of thousands of square kilometres available for lions and other wildlife." Even the IUCN, which maintains the Red List of Endangered Species, agreed with the zoologist that trophy hunting has helped protect many species, including rhinos and elephants.

However, these arguments hardly hold water in the West. Numbers don't stand a chance against pictures of killed animals. Hardly anyone wants to see that white men with money, of all people, shooting big animals in the bush should be part of nature conservation. So hunting is declining, and many parks are running out of money. In Niassa, there is barely enough for the staff. In 2020, Luwire only turned over US$600 000.

We are sitting by the river with Nick, Derek's right-hand man, when the emergency call comes in. The radio crackles, and one of the scouts is talking on the other end. Then the connection breaks. Nick looks at us. He says, "Laura collapsed." Laura is a zoologist from England who studied at Oxford and is now researching the evolution of animal populations in Mozambique. She left early in the morning three days ago. She wanted to walk across the reserve to set up cameras, but something happened; she collapsed and was unresponsive. Nick jumps into the open jeep. "You come with me," he says, and we speed off. Repeatedly, we hear from the scouts on the radio. They are off the road next to a mountain to the west. We find Laura late at night. She has a high fever and is shivering badly. It is malaria.

"We're at the ass end of the world," Laura says the next day. She is angry, feels terrible and should go to a hospital, but there is not one here. So, she swallows her pills and stares at the river. "This shouldn't have taken so long," she says. A park of this size should have emergency plans, but in Luwire, that is also what is wrong. That is part of the company's DNA, the shortages. There is a lack of money and therefore a lack of everything, staff, weapons, cars and equipment. Derek is piloting a massive ship with a small crew, leaking from a storm. What qualifies him for this? "Nothing," Derek says. "I'm just the only one willing to stay."

Derek can be a tough man, weatherproof, and always ready for a bar fight, but he talks about the animals in the park with gentle affection. Lions he calls "Big yellow fellows." Hyenas are "lovely bastards," the wild dogs "funny little dudes," the leopards "nasty beauties." The bush is Derek's home, his sanctuary, his mistress. Whenever order broke down, Derek went into the wild. To this day, he prefers to sleep out in the open. "If I'm not here for too long," Derek says, "I start to feel uncomfortable."

Derek had a friend, Ben, a bull elephant. He visited Derek in camp every day. He would hang around, bathe in the river and trunk into the tents. Ben disturbed the work or blocked the road until Derek threw something at him, and then he would leave. One evening in 2011, Derek was sitting in camp with Nick. They were eating when they heard the shots. The two men ran off in the direction of the noise. It only took them 20 minutes, but they were too late. "Tanzanian Axe" is the name of a technique poachers often use. Instead of cutting off both tusks of a shot elephant one after the other, they saw off the whole face with a chainsaw. That takes ten minutes. When Derek and Nick found Ben, he was still alive. Blood was pumping from his open head. Then he died. It was the beginning of what in Mozambique is called the "elephant crisis."

In 2011, professional ex-military poachers from Tanzania came to Mozambique. They recruited young men, killed almost half of Mozambique's elephant population, and hauled tons of ivory out of the parks. Only 3 000 of Niassa's 13 000 animals survived, many of them in L7. "Every day, we heard gunshots," says Nick. "And almost always, we were too late." But only almost always. Derek and Nick waged war over the park. "We took care of them," Derek says, referring to the poachers. He doesn't go into details.

During the weeks we spend in the Niassa Reserve, the conflict in Cabo Delgado continues to simmer. Rumours keep trickling down to us. We hear that the coastal town of Pemba has been attacked. We hear that the Russian mercenary group Wagner has intervened in the fighting. It is a conflict that the world takes little notice of, but many seem to be involved. The Chinese have an interest in the mines in the country. The French are drilling for gas off the coast. Rwanda and South Africa are sending troops to stake their claim as regional powers. They are all fighting over Mozambique, this beautiful, poor country. In Niassa, too, there is said to have been the first fighting, men on motorbikes coming into the villages. The impacts are getting closer.

On one of our last evenings, Derek gets a visitor. A friend has driven to the park from Pemba with a Styrofoam box full of ice and three kilos of fresh shrimps. In the evening, we sit on the terrace by the river and eat shrimp. Then suddenly, Derek's friend suddenly starts to cry. He is a big, heavy man; he cries with his whole body. He used to run a hotel on an island off Pemba. "A paradise," he says with blue water, sailboats, and shrimps. Then, a week ago, the terrorists came. "Everything is gone," the man says, "20 years of work, my whole life." Derek puts an arm around his shoulders. The friend calms down. "We'll get through this," he says, "it's just part of it." "When you live here," Derek says, "you can't go anywhere else. It's just too beautiful here for that. But you always have to be ready to improvise some elaborate evasive manoeuvre."

After returning from Africa, Laura, the zoologist, visited us in Berlin. The three of us sat in our flat. It was February 2022, raining outside, and Laura was talking about Niassa. Only a few weeks after we left, the situation there escalated. Terrorists entered the park. Luwire's staff were evacuated, and everyone expected an attack. Derek disappeared into the bush with a few men and many guns. Laura was the last to board the plane that took her out of the park. Two days later, her mobile vibrated. She had been sent a photo by Derek. It showed a fire, the main house in the camp, everything was on fire. That was the last she heard from Derek. We also wrote to him and heard nothing. We were sure he was no longer alive; his paradise seemed lost.

And then, in June 2022, a message popped up on our mobile phones: "Good to hear from you." As if nothing had happened. "Tell me about you, you crazy buggers!" Yes, Derek wrote, last year things got slightly out of control. But: "We took care of it and carry on." As always. His fight goes on.

Eugene Mbugua, Young Rich Television, Kenya

"I'm pretty good at knowing what people want to see," Eugene says. We are sitting in his garden on the outskirts of Nairobi, behind high hedges, at a long table covered with a tablecloth. The sun sparkles on martini glasses, champagne flutes, and a crystal orange juice carafe. "How about a drink?" asks Eugene, and a man appears out of nowhere with a bucket of ice. The air is warm and smells of summer. This is Easter brunch at Eugene Mbugua's, perhaps the most famous television producer in East Africa. Everything is perfect, almost like in a story. That's how it is with Eugene; who knows what people want to see.

Once upon a time, Eugene was poor. Then he became rich, another perfect story. He was Kenya's youngest self-made millionaire in his early 20s. Now he is 31 and produces some of the country's most popular TV series. Eugene revolutionised show-biz with a format new to East Africa, Reality TV. He had his first hit in 2012, a show about young millionaires called Young Rich. Young Rich made Eugene himself rich young, and this was only the beginning. He went on to produce Kenya's Perfect Wedding, Foods of Kenya, and finally, My Story, a glossy series in which politicians, artists and entrepreneurs tell their life stories. However, perhaps Eugene's greatest production is one that has never been broadcast but is always on the air. It is the story of his own life, The Eugene Mbugua Show.

The drive to our first meeting was cinematic, a trailer for what was to come. At ten o'clock in the morning, Eugene's driver stopped in front of our door in a dark green Mercedes limousine. He jumped out of the car and opened the door for us. Then he accelerated towards Easter brunch. Outside, Nairobi passed by, first dusty, then greener and greener. The city highways became avenues, roadside bustle gave way to flowerbeds, and then there were no more high-rise buildings, only gardens and villas protected by high hedges. Karen is the name of this part of town. Eugene lives here, and so does everyone else who is anyone in Nairobi. Even Uhuru Kenyatta, the president, has one of his residences here.

Eugene stepped out of his house, out of the shadows into the sunlight, when we pulled up, a petite man with long dreads almost to his waist. So, we ended up at this breakfast table, with a battery of glasses and a buffet out of a hotel brochure. Two lap dogs bounced across the lawn. Music trickled into the scene from loudspeakers, something classical, strings for brunch. Surreal. That's how it looked to us. Like a mixture of Alice in Wonderland and Eugene's reality shows which was most definitely intentional.

It is not easy to write about Eugene. He is a person who thinks of perfect stories. Every anecdote has a beginning and an end, climaxes and turning points, cliffhangers, and a moral. That makes him a good television producer but an impossible interviewee. Eugene does not answer; he tells, and you never meet him spontaneously, only in scenes he has designed himself. With him, everything fits together and makes sense, even the dark sides of his biography.

"I was born in a town called Kitale," says Eugene, "in western Kenya, in November 1990." His mother died when he was seven years old, and his father did not want him. His grandmother raised him for a few years, and then she grew old. Eugene went to an uncle, who passed him on. He came to live with an aunt, who became a burden. Eugene tells about it honestly, mercilessly in great detail. "I want you to know," he says. "but the details, don't write those down; suffice it to say I had a terrible childhood." Eugene was different from his classmates, smaller, poorer, but smarter. He withdrew and read everything he could find, novels, magazines, and non-fiction. He especially liked reading Sidney Sheldon, the American to whom the world owes Charmed, the television series in which an astronaut uncorks a pretty female genie named Jeannie and then has flirtatious adventures with her. Eugene read Sheldon's novels such as Revenge is a Sweet Word, Wrath of Angels and A Stranger in the Mirror. His desire for entertainment, for the perfect story, awoke.

"Come on, that's enough," says Eugene. Cliffhanger! He jumps up and runs into the house Bringing back books, novels, non-fiction and the latest Economist. He still reads everything. We talk about music and dictators. Eugene makes gin and tonic, Negronis, and martinis and plays with the dogs. A rubber ball bounces across the lawn. Eugene flickers through the garden. The scene 'Brunch at a Millionaire' seems to have been shot. Enter the eccentric genius. "Now that's an idea!" exclaims Eugene. "And so is this!" He pulls out a notebook and scribbles. "You could make a format out of that, couldn't you?" He beams. Come!" he calls, "I'll show you my house."

Inside, everything is as tidy as the garden outside. There is a big TV, lots of art, a shelf full of memorabilia, an Eiffel Tower from Paris, sand from the Cote d'Azur and Eugene's Wall of Heroes, portraits of people who inspire him. At the top hangs a picture of Ruby Bridges, one of the first black children allowed to attend a previously all-white school in New Orleans in 1960. The photo shows her on her first day of school in front of the school gate, where a racist mob was waiting for her, slavering, shouting. Next to it hangs Nelson Mandela, with the face that became a symbol of the struggle for a free Africa. Ali hangs there too, boxing glove raised in the air, the man who beat Joe Frazier at the Rumble in the Jungle. A single white face hangs on the wall, Malik Bendjelloul, a documentary filmmaker. Bendjelloul's most famous film was Searching for Sugarman, a documentary about the search for the musician Sixto Rodriguez, who became a star in South Africa but was unaware of it in his native Detroit and remained poor.

“I always realized why my childhood was so unhappy,” Eugene says. “Because we were poor.” So, he made a decision: “I knew that no one would come and save me. Either I would make it on my own or end up on the street.” Eugene studied accounting at the University of Nairobi because that sounded like money. However, he mostly worked part-time job after part-time job, one of which introduced him to television. First as an extra, then as a go-to guy, not for just any show, but for a series that Kenya had been celebrating for twenty years. Inspector Mwala.

“It’s an absurd show,” Eugene says. He laughs, opens his laptop, and opens YouTube. “Here,” he shouts, “watch this!” A woman’s voice warbles, “This weekend, Citizen TV brings you a little love and lots of laughter.” We see a smallish man wielding a big gun, sneaking around cars, arresting bandits. The woman in the video says: “He is one of the few actors to take Kenyan TV to the next level.” Eugene says, “That’s right! That’s really true.” Television was imported from abroad, and stations aired Mexican soap operas, series from the Philippines and second-hand shows. Europeans, Americans and Asians flickered across the screens, but no Africans. Inspector Mwala was one of the first successful formats made in Kenya and proved that Kenyans wanted Kenyan television too. There was money in it. Eugene sensed that. So, he gave up accounting and studied film. “But only part-time,” he says. “I ran six to eight different businesses while I was studying.”

His first job was teaching camera work at a public school. He walked to class through the fine dust fog of Nairobi. “Man, I looked fucked up,” Eugene says. “Like a homeless kid. But I knew nothing could stop me.” He earned $150 a month, enough to put into the next business. Eugene opened a street stall near the university selling burnt films. It went so well that he opened a game shop. He set up televisions and game consoles, and Kenya’s youth came and paid by the minute. On the side, Eugene wrote episodes for Inspector Mwala, freelanced for a newspaper, and organised trips into nature. He did it all. They were sweaty years – but the best in Eugene’s life until then. He made friends and discovered Nairobi’s subcultures, musicians, gamers, businesspeople, athletes and artists. He learned their codes, who wanted to see what, and new ideas came to him every day. They filled notebooks, business, business, business, just in time for the end of his studies. When he was 22, Eugene created a concept for a TV show, Young Rich.

A week after our breakfast, we meet Eugene again. This time he picks us up himself in a four-wheel drive off-road monster at 5 am. It is raining, but Eugene wants to show us that his homeland is famous for nature. Two million tourists come to Kenya every year. And almost all of them want safaris, savannahs, sandy beaches and sunsets. Kenya: a travel catalogues longing destination. No wonder this country has been described so often in films and books such as The White Masai, The Eternal Gardener, Beyond Africa, and Nowhere in Africa, all set in Kenya. Even the names of the landscapes here sound big. Serengeti, Masai Mara, Mount Kenya and, of course, Ngong Mountains. That is where we are going with Eugene; he wants to go hiking there.

From Karen, we head southwest. After a few kilometres, we pick up a policeman, a taciturn man waiting in a damp uniform at a bend in the road. He will walk with us because there are always robberies in the Ngong Mountains. The road becomes steeper, and the car steers through mud and bumps over stones. Then we are there – in the middle of nowhere. We get out in a fog that swallows our voices.

Eugene walks a lot; in the past, he walked because he had to; today, he does it because he enjoys it. He walked through Nairobi, a city of four and a half million people. Kenya is the third largest economy south of the Sahara; the capital alone accounts for one-fifth of the country's economic output. In the city centre, office and apartment complexes with glass facades stand behind high walls. Eugene walked past them every day, eyeing the lives of the rich. In front of the apartment complexes, billboards advertised their interiors, showing gleaming kitchen islands, fitness rooms and swimming pools. "I was obsessed with these complexes," Eugene says. He saw the people who lived there wanting to be like them and have what they had. So, he came up with his idea of Young Rich, a reality show about young millionaires that would satisfy curiosity about what it must be like to be rich. Eugene pitched it to all the major networks and was rejected. The programme bosses asked, "Are there even that many millionaires in Kenya? And why should they trust you?"

"Look out!" Eugene prances up the slope in front of us. "Watch out," he calls, "it's getting slippery here." He was always petite and used to be skinny as well. "And not athletic," he says. Today Eugene is no longer that; today, he is very fit. He makes training videos on the side. Everyone wants to see that too. We trudge up the Ngong Mountains behind him. Eugene bounces, we stumble, he narrates, and we gasp for air. "Don't worry about it," Eugene says. "Sometimes, there are men at the top who give you massages. If you're lucky." From how he says it, we suspect we will be lucky. Indeed, we reach the summit, and there are two Maasai waiting. They have spread blankets on the ground, and we have to lie down on them; the masseurs tear at our limbs, and Eugene films with his mobile phone, reality TV style.

The fact that Young Rich was shot at all is also due to a man Eugene had never met, Uhuru Kenyatta, the president. Kenyatta has ruled Kenya since 2013. His father, Jomo Kenyatta, led the country to independence in 1963 and ruled for 15 years until his death. His son, Uhuru, inherited the family fortune (and the claim to power). He is considered one of the wealthiest people in Africa but not always a staunch democrat. In 2010, the International Criminal Court investigated him for incitement to murder, expulsion and robbery. Even though the charges were dropped for lack of evidence, Kenyatta remains controversial. When Eugene's studies ended, this was the man who decided to become president. "And when you start an election campaign," Eugene says, "it is customary in Kenya to buy a radio station." That's what Kenyatta did. He bought media power, and the market changed. Suddenly there was new competition; viewers had to be courted, and new ideas and formats had to be found. The phone rang for Eugene, and a programme director said, "You had an idea for a reality show."

We sit on the top of the Ngong Mountains, and Eugene tells us about his breakthrough. Of course, the sky cracks open, the fog recedes, and we look for miles into this land, the stage of such great stories and sagas. "Heroes." That's what television is about, Eugene says. About finding and creating them, Young Rich had what it took. The station paid Eugene US$2 500 for a pilot. He raced to the university, recruited his crew, and borrowed equipment, tripods, cameras, microphones and lights. He had a team and technology, but he did not have a millionaire. Eugene laughs. “I had gone pretty far out on a limb.” Only one person he knew at the time seemed like a millionaire, a man named Ken, who owned the nightclub where Eugene liked to party. “I didn’t know how much money Ken had,” Eugene says. “But he owned two cars and had a big aquarium in his office – how much more millionaire vibe do you need?” Today, this Ken is bankrupt, but he was a millionaire back then. Eugene approached him and asked him to join in. “Please,” he said, “I need a break!” Ken agreed.

In the first episode of Young Rich, viewers found everything that made the show so famous. The quick cuts and driving music. The host made a scatterbrained mistake in every episode, and the tracking shots past vibrating sports car exhaust pipes. “Man,” says Eugene, “that was really chavvy in parts.” However, Young Rich was much more; it was a series of well-researched business portraits. Kenya’s businessmen revealed how much their personal assets were, what their company’s turnover was and what their margins were. Young Rich was nothing less than a guide to getting rich. Eugene learned from all his protagonists, and his life followed his product. First came television, and then it came true; by the time he was 23, Eugene had made his first million. In the meantime, 100 episodes of Young Rich have been shot, and the series is known throughout East Africa.

We sit in Eugene’s office a few days after our trip to the mountains. Of course, it is high up, and Eugene looks down low from his desk, right at the school where they ignored him back then. On the bookshelf are autobiographies and success guides. Next to them is a scratched handheld camera, a Sony the device used to shoot the first episode of Young Rich. Eugene wears grey suit trousers and leather shoes. Next story. He is now the boss and runs his company from this office. It’s also called Young Rich, after the first hit.

Eugene reaches for a remote control. He has produced 11 shows; trailers are hailing down on us. Number one: Get in the Kitchen. Electric guitars strum over close-ups of flames, shooting pans, swearing guys. Off-camera announcer: “Get Kenyan men off the couch and into the kitchen!” The show’s premise is that Kenyan men are terrible in the kitchen. Their wives pay them back by nominating them for Get in the Kitchen, where the men compete on TV, frying and chopping without a recipe. Ultimately, a jury of wives, mothers and daughters decides who has failed the least! Get in the Kitchen is an enormous success and is now running in South Africa and Nigeria. “A lot of my formats,” Eugene says, “have Pan-African qualities.” He moves on to show number two, Foods of Kenya. One jeep, one man, one track. The greying host gazes musingly into the camera. The concept is that Kenya is big and cooks differently. An adventure journey with chilli peppers, traditional dances and spice shifts against a mountain backdrop. Eugene says: “The show has shown Kenyans how diverse their culture is.” He says that also applies to the following format, Our Perfect Wedding. The concept is to allow the whole country to share a couple’s wedding and the three days before when everyone goes crazy. Tears! Reconciliation! Mothers-in-law! Series catchphrase: “With 42 different cultures in play, clashes are bound to happen…" In Kenya, as everywhere else, what people want to see reveals a lot about them.

In Young Rich's office, men and women sit at white tables in front of Apple devices. Music plays in a screening room, and filming takes place in front of a green screen in the studio. When Eugene enters a room, his employees look up and work even harder. He is friendly to them, nice even, but definitely not chummy. "I'm not in show biz," he says, "I'm in the television business." Young Rich now has 50 employees. The company turns over US$5 million a year. "The margin," Eugene says, "is off the record." We can only say this much; it is impressive. Young Rich produces formats for all the major private television stations in Kenya, K24, KTN, NTV, Maisha Magic East, Showmax, Iflix, Kwese, Startimes and Kirk TV. All show concepts still come from Eugene. "Every Monday, I come to the office with ten ideas," he says. These ideas change as the audience and Kenya change. Just as Eugene has changed, he no longer dreams of millions, luxury and expensive cars. He has all that. Now he dreams much bigger.

"Of all my formats, I like Stori Yangu the best," says Eugene. Each episode is about the life of someone who has changed Kenya. There is the former vice president of the country, the governor who fights corruption and Kenya's first female pilot. Perhaps the most famous investigative journalist in East Africa, Stori Yangu, tells of extraordinary lives and spares nothing. Strings roar in the background. Quotes fade in as script: "Power is a very temporary thing…" "I started my company with only 2 000 shillings," says a woman. "I became a Christian to get something to eat," says a man. This is the format that matters most to Eugene. He used to be poor, filmed a hit show about millionaires and learned to be rich. Now he produces a series about people who have shaped a nation, leaders and power. Eugene is not just a television producer but a businessman Kenya knows. In the countryside, he runs a cattle farm; in Nairobi, he has nightclubs. He owns property, plays golf, and is photographed and pictured next to the country's powerful. "Are you planning to go into politics?" asks Sophia. Eugene says: "Many who think they are too smart for politics end up under the rule of idiots."

Young Rich is becoming increasingly political. Stori Yangu is just one example. Next, Eugene wants to bring a debate format, a show where teenagers discuss politics. He wants to create heroes, he says, preferably ones that shine far beyond Kenya. "What we need," he says, "is a global hit, a format that the whole world will see." Does he already have an idea for that? "Yes, of course!" said Eugene. "I'm going to…" And there – cliffhanger – his phone rings. "Yes," says Eugene. "I understand. We'll do that." He turns to us and covers the receiver with his hand. "Sorry," he says, and now he has to grin. "I'll just take care of this thing really quick, and then I'll tell you all about it."

Samrawit Fikru, Ride, Ethiopia

It was love at first sight. She was 17 years old, he was two. She was a young Ethiopian, he was silver and no bigger than a handbag. She had never seen anything like him up close. He was: a laptop. “When I pressed A on the keyboard, an A also appeared on this glowing surface,” she says. That was the beginning of Samrawit Fikru’s extraordinary journey. “What is that?” she asked her older brother. He laughed and said, “A laptop.” Fikru had always wanted to be a doctor. Now she had a new dream: “I’ll do something with computers.” And that’s exactly what she did.

Fikru’s company, Ride, is a ride-hailing service, similar to Uber. Except Uber doesn’t exist in Ethiopia. Those who want to get from A to B in Addis Ababa “ride.” Nearly four million people live in Ethiopia’s capital. The roads don’t have names, but they do have a lot of potholes. Donkeys, rusty minibuses and pedestrians obstruct traffic. Nevertheless, Ride almost always works.

The concept is simple: Ride arranges rides. The company establishes contact between drivers and customers, sets a price, suggests a route, and records it in the app via GPS. In this way, Ride outperforms the old cab drivers. Every year, more customers book more rides – and a percentage of each one goes to Fikru’s company. It works like this, or something similar, all over the world. Ride’s business model itself is no sensation. But Ride’s CEO is.

When Samrawit Fikru started her company in 2014, she had no contacts, no buddies, no capital. But she triumphed. She’s argued with politicians and revamped an entire sector. She is now one of Ethiopia’s most successful digital entrepreneurs and just 32 years old.

“I was fed up with it,” Fikru says. She was fed up with it. We sit in her office, at Ride’s headquarters, on heavy, black leather chairs, drinking bitter Ethiopian coffee, while outside the window, Addi’s perpetual traffic jam honks and smokes. Fikru talks about starting her company. She talks about the motivation that led her to create all this, about her drive at the time: frustration. She was 24 years old. She had a master’s degree in computer science, worked a lot, stayed late at the office, and only went home after dark. And because the buses had often stopped running by then, she had no choice but to take a taxi. She stood at the side of the road, waved and waved, until at some point a taxi stopped, and she entrusted herself to these smoke-spewing, blue-and-white-painted, Soviet Ladas – and their drivers. It must have been pretty bad. “Horrible,” Fikru says. In part, the taxi drivers ditched her because she wouldn’t pay the asking price. Partly they were rude, unfriendly, unprofessional. “I just got ripped off one too many times,” Fikru says. And that’s how she came up with the idea for her app on the back seat of a Lada. She was young and fed up. She saw the problem first and then a solution, a system as neat and reliable as only tech can be.

That moment was almost eight years ago, and now no one in Addis Ababa has to hail junk taxis anymore. Ride has been so successful that “to ride” has become synonymous with taxi driving in Ethiopia. Four million customers use Ride, and the app alone has been downloaded over one million times. 43,000 male and female drivers work with Firku’s company. And they earn well, very well. Unlike Uber, Ride doesn’t have to be accused of letting people drive for a pittance. Those who work with Fikru’s app make an average of 12 trips a day and earn between four and seven Euros for each one. A driver can earn up to 1500 Euros a month in this way – more than ten times the Ethiopian minimum wage of 140 Euros. And above all: more than any taxi driver. Anyone who makes enough trips with Ride can quickly buy a second car and then rent it out to an acquaintance who also wants to ride. This creates financing structures for entire families, ones in which women can participate – 40 percent of Ride drivers are female. Fikru earns money from her rides; 12 percent of the fare goes to her company. How much revenue she makes from it, what the margin looks like, or what Ride is worth, she won’t reveal. But you can do the math in your head. Tens of thousands of riders, millions of customers: It’s a lot of money.

Despite all its success, Ride’s headquarters are more reminiscent of a registration office than a successful startup. Behind numbered counters, women in yellow shirts fill out forms. Men stand in front of them with more forms and wait. Neon lights flicker. There’s a smell of people waiting in line. “All future drivers,” Fikru says. “They’re signing up right now.” In the next room, others are doing their first training. Content: no shorts, no private conversations behind the wheel, no reckless driving maneuvers. Fikru came up with that, too. Ride’s CEO has been called a “tech genius” and “one of Africa’s business leaders.” But she’s like her office: first impressions can be deceiving, too. Fikru is not short, but tiny. She wears worn-out shoes and a polo shirt. She doesn’t look like the boss, more like the IT intern. “I’m more on the tech side,” she says.

Fikru, the boss of nerds, takes a breath and pauses. She doesn’t like to talk about herself. But: she always has to. Fikru is famous in Addis. She gives talks, is interviewed, argues on- and offline with business and politics. “All over the world, people are happy when there is something new out,” she says. That alone, she says, is an initial selling point for any product. “But not in Ethiopia. Here, anything new is met with suspicion.” That is the great struggle of her life. The struggle for the new. The struggle against the old. It shapes her biography. It makes up her company, which builds tech for the future. But it’s bigger than that. It is the central issue of contention in this giant country, where churches are 1,000 years old but city dwellers call their taxis by app; where old women roast coffee beans over glowing coals – in the entrance halls of modern office buildings. Where is Ethiopia headed? What is it to become in the 21st century? Will it become the model for Africa that many patriotic Ethiopians believe their nation to be anyway? Or will the country remain a problem?

After Nigeria, Ethiopia has the second largest population in Africa and one of the fastest growing economies on the continent. Even during the Corona pandemic, GDP continued to grow: by 8.4 percent in 2019, 6.1 percent in 2020, and 6.3 percent in 2021. The country exports electricity to neighboring countries – even if it fails in Addis time and again. Hydroelectric power generation is booming. Ethiopia is damming the Nile in a gigantic, highly controversial dam project called GERD, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. And the textile sector is also growing rapidly. But much of the economy is still in its infancy. First and foremost: digitalisation. In 2022, only one in four Ethiopians had access to the Internet. And 40 percent of them only had access via cell phones. But that, too, is changing. Between 2021/22, the number of Internet users increased by 13 percent. So the direction is right, no, it could be right. Because there is still the government. And it turns off the Internet from time to time. When protests threaten, which are organised via Facebook, or when a news blackout is necessary, the network goes out all over Ethiopia – for everyone. This is outrageous stupidity (apart from the democratic implications), costing not only businesses but also the government itself millions. But it keeps happening. Also because there is only one provider in Ethiopia, Ethiotel – a telecommunications company owned by the state. Even though the country is undergoing a privatisation process, most key sectors are still dominated by the state. Telecommunications is one of them, but so are transportation and banking. “And no one expects that to change soon,” says Fikru. That depresses her. But it also spurs her on. It’s what she knows how to do: Changing systems, pushing through new things. Even if she hasn’t always been successful at it.

“The taxi drivers were my biggest problem,” says Fikru. It started when the company was founded. Ride was not intended to compete with taxis. On the contrary, it was meant to be a tool, especially for them. When Samrawit programmed her app, she didn’t want private individuals as drivers, but rather to sell her system to taxi companies as a way to find more customers, set prices, work better. In fact, a few companies were interested in it at first, too. They tried out Ride. And Fikru’s app delivered on its promise. Drivers increased their sales. Customers were happier. But when the free trial ended after six months, no company wanted to pay for the service. So Fikru extended: another six months, for free. “Naïve,” she says today. Because even after a full year of testing, she found no takers for her system.

Then, in 2015, she turned away from taxi companies – relying on private individuals. Fikru placed ads in newspapers and on Facebook, walked around the city, approached everyone who seemed to own a car and looked unemployed. She organised training sessions for hundreds of prospective drivers. She hired mechanics. She wanted to make sure that only those who were neat, followed the system and had a car that was safe drove for Ride. Then Fikru found an investor abroad, an Ethiopian who lived in Canada. He was willing to put his money into their tech startup. And finally, Ride really grew. Within two years, nearly 2,000 male and female riders signed up. Slowly, the old competition buckled. The first taxi companies came on board. Fikru entered into a joint venture with one of the largest – together they convinced the government to let them import duty-free cars from China. Now, new yellow-green Lifan cars drove through Addis Ababa, for a taxi company, but most importantly: for Ride. Samrawit's startup seemed to have created a perfect system. For customers, taxi rides were now cheaper. Drivers still earned more. Tech seemed to have triumphed, the future, the new. And then came the government.

One morning Samrawit Fikru came to work and her company was closed. Employees stood outside in the street. They were whispering. Something had happened. Yellow barrier tape fluttered at the door. Men in grey official-looking suits stood in front of it. They were carrying a court order. The city had determined: Ride was not a taxi company, not really, but was still arranging rides, somehow. And that couldn't be. There were no laws for that, no responsible office, no official process. "We had a new idea," Samrawit says, "that the old system couldn't digest." Bureaucracy versus technology, old laws versus new business models – it's a global conflict. But hardly anywhere is it waged as doggedly as in Ethiopia, where bureaucracy is also ancient and sacred. So anyone who is confronted with a court order in this country can actually quit right away. Samrawit Fikru knew that, too. But then something unheard-of happened.

The customers fought back. They disagreed with their government. They appealed to the minister of transport, they demanded that the mayor of Addis act. Thousands signed petitions on Facebook. Hundreds demonstrated outside the shuttered startup office. Everyone was afraid that Addis Ababa's taxi system would revert to its pre-Ride status. And Fikru turned to the public. She argued with politicians, sued in court – and succeeded. To this day, she doesn't know when the breakthrough came, or what tipped the scales. The system was too opaque for that. But at some point, something in the impenetrable thicket of Ethiopian bureaucracy gave way. Ride was free once again. And most importantly – without any new legislation – suddenly completely legal.

Since then, things have been going pretty well for Ride. In the last three years, the number of drivers has increased tenfold. New taxi partners have been acquired, and even more cars have been imported. Now the fleet is set to become greener – Fikru wants to bring in e-cars from abroad, wants to help her drivers buy them. She can now steer her company with confidence. In Ethiopia, Ride is the unrivaled market leader. That's partly because the big players from outside have never been able to expand into this particular market. So for Fikru, the Ethiopian government's isolationpolicy had been a good thing: It allowed her to grow undisturbed. And now that her company has fledged, she is already planning to leave the nest. Ride is to go to neighboring countries. Competition awaits there, to be sure, some of it from Uber. But Samrawit believes her company can prevail. Ride, she says, could become an internationally successful product. A system of its own, one that works, something completely new from Ethiopia.