Below The Radar: The invincible economy of Kwa Mai Mai

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“What makes Kwa Mai Mai distinct is its non-discriminatory and welcoming character in that it does not alienate the marginalised or the prosperous. It does not distinguish between the haves and the have nots.

This is a place where culture, heritage and tradition, as championed by its inhabitants, converge and find its expression through the creative work and cultural expressions of would-be migrant workers”.

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• Albert Street is one of five (5) streets, viz. Commissioner, Troye, Ferreira, and Cornelius, named back in September 1886 when Kidger Tucker drew up a plan for a new residential area of Johannesburg, which of course did not include the African majority.

• It was not long before then that gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand that the extraction of labour from the villages began and migrant workers flocked to the city in search of employment.

Source: Flashback.com
• To legitimize their presence in the city, Africans had to que outside the then Bantu Affairs Departments, set up across the republic, to process the so-called natives seeking permission to travel to Johannesburg in search of employment; a place Lauretta Ngcobo, in her book ‘And They Didn’t Die’, refers to as “the burial ground of all human dignity”.

Source: mashable.com

Source: Flashback.com
• On each side of the street are the people who in the unpalatable past of this country could have been classified as vagrants consequently subjected to humiliation by policemen and protectors of a despot system tasked with the responsibility to rid the city of gold off unwanted elements.

• But, today the people who patronize this part of Johannesburg have been spared of such racial profiling and humiliation; instead they offer a variety of services ranging from unsolicited window washers, parking attendants with a car wash conveniently offered, all in exchange for meagre coins which the privileged willingly hand out as they reckon is good enough for receiver to get by.
• Whatever its historical meaning Albert Street is, its journey is abruptly brought to a halt right at the gates of what is popularly known as Kwa Mai Mai.

• A sign above the gate, engraved with ‘Welcome to Kwa Mai-Mai’, can have multiple meanings depending on the evoke different emotions as per one’s cultural disposition.

• This a trade zone that over the years has managed to create its own informal economy, far from the gaze of venture capitalists and economic hitmen.
• There is something intriguing about how Kwa Mai Mai has managed to survive and stave off economic vultures who have combed most parts of Johannesburg to create upmarket markets, developed and rented back to the traders at higher rates.

• Defying the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality this is a market that has refused to be swallowed up by property developers eager to turn African market places into shopping malls that estrange the very same people these trading zones were designed to serve in the first place.
• Kwa Mai Mai might not enjoy the same limelight that emerging collaborative hubs, where culture meets business and lifestyle entertainment is the tie that binds. It might not be in the same league as the creative enclaves that have sprawled around downtown and uptown Johannesburg in places such as Maboneng or Braamfontein.

• “What makes Kwa Mai Mai distinct is its non-discriminatory and welcoming character in that it does not alienate either the marginalised nor the prosperous. It does not distinguish between the haves and the have nots”.
• This is a place where culture, heritage and tradition, as championed by its inhabitants, converge and find its expression through the creative work and cultural expressions of would-be migrant workers.

• Rejected by a system of formal employment, here the people have created an economy which is influenced mainly by a social system of their beliefs and tradition.

• In turn these villagers have dug deep into their Afrocentric soul and soon discovered the long hidden treasurers of what makes them truly unique from the urban dwellers.
• Not willing to go home to face rejection and become a mockery back in the village as people ‘abashaywe iGoli’ (those who failed to make it in Joburg).

• They have taken full control of the means of production and have created a distribution network reaching far-flung areas of South Africa even to the neighbouring states.

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• In their determination to re-imagine new possibilities in the post colonial these villagers-turned-city-dwellers have managed to built a business on the strength of their belief in the economic value of a culture that for many years has been exoticized for public display.

• Emerging from the margins of society, these urban villagers, have entered a space traditionally reserved for merchants and traders of other races where migrant workers would have been employed to offer their service to produce the very same cultural artefacts only to be sold back to them at unimaginable prices.
This is a place where culture, heritage and tradition, as championed by its inhabitants, converge and find its expression through the creative work and cultural expressions of migrant traders.

This is a place that has become a recluse for those who left their villages to look for formal employment but soon abandoned the search when it became clear that such opportunities did not favour them.
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