

Kanju

The Fine Line Between Genius and Crime

ALWAYS WONDERED WHY I never receive Nigerian e-mail scams. Perhaps my spam blockers are too good. Perhaps my obviously Yoruba name deters potential predators, who see me as one of them — wise to and thus exempt from the swindle. Imagine my delight when I received this pitch from an in-box acquaintance:

How're you doing and I trust that I find you in good health. I'm really sorry to reach out to you this manner and I'm sorry for not informing you about my urgent trip to Scotland. I am here for a Seminar and to complete a project. Presently, I will be glad if I could confide in you and I want this issue to be confidential between You and I because I don't want people to get worried about my situation.

Everything was fine until I got robbed on my way back to the hotel and I lost my Wallet, mobile phone and some valuables during this incident. I'm sending you this message to inform you that am stranded at the moment and need your help with a loan of \$3350 to pay up the bills and make arrangements to get back home.

As a bit of an experiment, I copied this message and sent it to a random sampling of contacts. Of the forty people I e-mailed, a few warned me

that my account may have been hacked. Most ignored the note. Predictably, no one offered to front the money.

Despite what looks like growing indifference, e-mails like this have made my country famous. While Web-based swindles are common in many countries around the world, Nigerians seem to have perfected the dogged pursuit of international money transfer scams, sometimes known — after the section of the Nigerian criminal code referring to such activity — as 419. Those three digits don't quite do justice to the hundreds upon thousands of elaborate, sometimes hilarious Internet capers that have sullied Nigeria's digital reputation.

As is well known by now, 419 predators blast pleading e-mails asking for emergency loans, or assistance in freeing vast, "trapped" sums of money in exchange for hefty payouts. The classic scam involves a Nigerian prince attempting to reclaim his birthright. Marks are asked to provide Social Security and bank account numbers that allow the criminals to drain vast sums. Some victims are urged to send cashier's checks, or to wire money. Others cite known public figures (the wife of deposed Liberian dictator Charles Taylor, for example), or hint at the opportunity to take advantage of lax accounting and corruption in a distant bureaucracy.

The FBI has reported losses of millions of dollars a year to these scams, which have grown more sophisticated over time. Complex websites and forged ID cards and bank statements are now stock-in-trade for the gangs of scammers who have cornered the market. Tell-tale grammatical errors are fewer and farther between. The modern scammer exploits the authenticity of familiarity; e-mails are sent from the real accounts of our acquaintances. From 1995 to 1998, a 419 scam was responsible for defrauding Banco Noroeste in Brazil of \$181 million — the third-largest bank heist in history. In 2009, a Nigerian living in Singapore was arrested for trying to defraud the National Bank of Ethiopia of \$27 million.

I'd argue the crowning achievement of these "Yahoo Boys" (so called because of the e-mail service that many use to spin their traps) came in 2008, when former US secretary of state Colin Powell found himself onstage at a benefit concert in London, boogying to "Yahoozee,"

a popular song by Nigerian artist Olu Maintain, glorifying the life of savvy, silent crime that had exploded in Nigeria's backdoor economy. The lyrics tell a flashy story:

*If I hammer
First thing na Hummer
One million dollars
Elo lo ma je ti n ba se si Naira?**

Thousands of fans appreciated the verse—a form of swagger certification native to hip-hop. But most people see the nuisance e-mails as evidence of moral turpitude—the devil in the digital. I believe the e-mails are proof of a trend that promises to transform Africa at large.

The scams are really about connection. It is no accident that the globalization of 419 has coincided with the spread of Internet connectivity. The late 1990s explosion of Internet cafés in sub-Saharan Africa created shared and slow but cheap connections to the World Wide Web. The most common offenders of the code remain young men who exploit this novel connectivity to make a profit. By subbing in a new location for each manufactured “emergency”—Manila, Mumbai, Madrid—the scammers travel the world, bathed in the light of their computer screens.

The scams are also about disillusion. Of course, cash is a motivation. But the Yahoo Boys' naughtiness also comes from a sense of empty formal alternatives (in fact, the 419 scramble for foreign assets stemmed from the precipitous drop in value of the *naira*, Nigeria's currency). Scamming for a living is one way of exiting an institutional framework that has failed to provide jobs. One youth, having been successfully prosecuted by the beleaguered Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, gave an anonymous interview explaining how and why he became a scammer:

* How much is that in *naira*?

I come from a poor family in Lagos, Nigeria. We did not have very much money and good jobs are hard to find. I was approached to work for a gang master when I was 15, because I had done well in school with my English, and was getting to be good with computers. The gang master was offering good money and I took the chance to help my family. . . . In the year before I was arrested I earned about \$75,000 (£46,000) for my family. I bought my family a better house and drove a BMW. I had mobile phones and laptops and everything that comes with having lots of money.

Then again, 419 is about drive. Nigerians tut-tut about 419—half joking, half mortified. But its inventors are sometimes the smartest kids in the room: the best with English, critical thinking, and computers. At the very least, they demonstrate a tenacity that is endemic to successful entrepreneurs from Oprah Winfrey to Nigerian Aliko Dangote, the richest man in Africa. In another life, the Yahoo Boys may have enjoyed aboveboard business success. As Apple cofounder Steve Jobs noted in a 1995 interview, a thin line divides genius and crime:

I know from my own education that if I hadn't encountered two or three individuals that spent extra time with me, I'm sure I would have been in jail. . . . I could see those tendencies in myself to have a certain energy to do something. It could have been directed at doing something interesting that other people thought was a good idea or doing something interesting that maybe other people didn't like so much.

The Yahoo Boys may lack the primary school teachers, the elder mentors, or the Silicon Valley structures to guide them away from criminal activities. Instead, they leverage ambition, resourcefulness, and tools at hand—including their own wits—to pursue a vilified but beneficial livelihood. Equipped with only an e-mail address, these criminals have earned millions of dollars and international notoriety, solving the common African experience of economic stagnation and proving that you can make something from nothing at all.

Academic writer Louis Chude-Sokei, in a wonderful essay on the

topic of Nigerian Internet scams, seems to be smiling. "It is hard not to be impressed," he writes. Chude-Sokei believes the scammers are "the public face of West Africa's intimacy with digital media and technology and of Nigeria's refusal to wait passively for either justice from their political system or global charity."* While I don't condone criminality, I, too, refuse to clutch my pearls about 419. From a bird's-eye view, the virtual crime wave begins to look like an amazing new kind of entrepreneurship.

The Yahoo Boys embody a spirit I constantly confront when traveling in Africa. I've begun to call it *kanju* — the specific creativity born from African difficulty. As it turns out, uncertain electricity, clogged roads, and nonexistent social protections can make life tough, but they also produce an extraordinary capacity for making do.

Kanju is why I don't always mind traffic in Africa. For street vendors, the presence of thousands of slowly moving vehicles is an unbeatable marketing opportunity. Thus during "go-slow," as rush hour is known, you can buy water, fruits and vegetables, packaged snacks, mobile phone airtime, mobile phone chargers, and, occasionally, live animals — all through your car window (take that, Amazon). Even if I'm not in the market for children's clothing or fireworks, a road trip offers a glimpse into the dynamism of African commercial life. Just when you think you've seen it all, someone is selling a coat rack balanced on her head.

Traffic marketing is a job for the quick mind with quicker feet. Cars don't always bother stopping to examine wares. Sales can turn on a lingering glance. Once, in Ghana, I silently cheered a vendor I watched sprint 400 meters at what seemed like Olympic record pace. When he reached his target, it turned out that he was not selling but retrieving a bag of peeled oranges he had pushed through the window for exami-

* Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's wry novel *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*, Andrew Apter's "IBB = 419," and Dan Smith's *A Culture of Corruption* all trace this history as well.

nation. Without hesitation, or even a perfunctory show of disappointment, he began to work the adjacent line of irate commuters.

Like the Yahoo Boys, these are not lives to glamorize, but to consider. Mohammed Ibrahim, the Sudanese-born billionaire and founder of the international telecommunications company Celtel, has given it some thought. "I always say Africans are the greatest entrepreneurs," he told me. "Many people wake up in the morning not knowing what they're going to do — but they have to make some money. So they do whatever is needed. If it's raining, you'll go sell an umbrella. If it's hot, you sell ice or some Coke. People try to find ways to make a living, and there's great energy."

He's right, but African entrepreneurship is about more than making a living — it elevates rule bending to fine art. If you want to see the world's most novel business plans, go to the massive, mostly illicit car resale market in Lagos, where a woman drifts through the crowd of potential buyers, selling imitation license plates to those who don't want to brave the car registration authority. Go to the coastal high street of Dakar, where a man is reselling the free headphones and eye masks distributed onboard by international airlines. Go to Nairobi, where Gladys tends her family farm.

Once you start to look for it, this energy is everywhere. Driving on the smoothed dirt roads ringing Lake Victoria in Uganda, I chanced upon the largest speed bump I've ever seen. Rutted roads are no surprise in Africa, but this one seemed calculated — a mountain where there ought to have been a molehill. There was no way around it, and before I knew it, my car had bottomed out. Instantly, a gaggle of young men materialized to "help." They hadn't warned me about the hazard but were happy to perform a rescue — for a fee, of course! I gave them an earful but later laughed at their cunning.

In Yoruba, a language of Nigeria, *kanju* literally means "to rush or make haste"; in English, we might say it is to "hustle," "strive," "know how," or "make do." There are some existing terms that get close to my meaning. *Jua kali* (which means "harsh sun" in Swahili) refers to the resourceful labor in Kenya's informal sector. "*Système D*" and "Article 15" refer to the ecology of workarounds and rule breaking that gov-

erns parts of French central Africa. It's *kalabule* in Ghana, *magendo* in Uganda. Political scientist Joel Migdal calls *kanju* logic "strategies of survival—blueprints for action and belief in a world that hovers on the brink of a Hobbesian state of nature."

In other words, Africa's *kanju* culture is more Darwin than Degas, less about subjective beauty than about practical solutions, and doing much more with far less. In fact, the most important thing about *kanju* is that it is born out of everything outsiders pity in Africa. Like the sand in an oyster that creates a pearl, hardship produces an attitude that can be leveraged to attack the same. After years studying informality in Nigeria, Dutch architect and planner Rem Koolhaas reached the same conclusion. In the West, he writes, "there's a sense of infinite choice, but a very conventional set of options from which to choose." By contrast, "in Lagos there is no choice—but there are countless ways to articulate the condition of no choice."

I spent the better part of three years trying to count the ways. Beyond an intense and necessary work ethic, I discovered a rich archive of processes, products, and people that are changing the development trajectory in Africa. They do so by combining the basic ingredients of *kanju*—recycling, resilience, and the pointed irreverence of the Yahoo Boys.

Recycling is the natural corollary to resource scarcity—an integral part of being "lean." I traveled to South Africa a few weeks after the closing ceremonies of the 2010 World Cup. I winced at the sight of football *tchotchkes* still cluttering the Johannesburg airport—including thousands of unsold vuvuzela horns. Trying, in my rental car, to navigate the hazards of left-side driving, I heard a story on the radio. A South African woman had created a washing machine from a vuvuzela. It works not unlike a mechanized washer: by poking holes in the cheap plastic casing, she had created a tool to agitate clothing, soap, and water in a bucket.

I parked. With pluck, a bit of creativity, and cast-off materials, this woman had devised a tool to ease the daily chore of the millions who wash in Africa. What's more, she embodied the African attitude I had

been pondering for months. *Kanju* solutions, I determined, take inventory: *What do I have? What do I need? What can I do? What can I do without?*

Lynette Denny asks herself as much most days. She is a doctor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Cape Town's Groote Schuur Hospital, famous for performing the world's first successful heart transplant. She is ruddy-cheeked, quick-witted, and effervescent in her concern for her country's health and development. On Thursday and Friday afternoons, she drives from the glittering mountain bay to the sprawling Cape Flats, where the population is unanimously black and poor. There, she manages the Khayelitsha Cervical Cancer Screening Project.

In *kanju* style, Denny's clinic is actually two metal shipping containers stacked on top of one another. Nevertheless, her lean staff treats cervixes, tests for HIV, administers medicine and guidance, and, she says, does "everything but operate" in pursuit of women's gynecological health. Low-risk pregnant women give birth here. The clinic also hosts a one-stop rape counseling center. Like many public health services, it is overwhelmed: Denny sees twenty to thirty women per afternoon but has "mastered the art of patients thinking they've had me for thirty minutes when it's been two minutes."

Miles away and years ago, Kenneth Nnebue seeded Nollywood with the same frugal genius. The *N* stands for Nigeria. The rest is self-explanatory. If 419 is the country's most hated export, Nollywood is its most loved. The local film industry makes some of the most profitable original films in the world. Behind Bollylwood (sprung from India's Bombay-based studios), Nollywood is second-ranked in the number of movies it produces—up to two thousand per year—and among the world's top revenue generators—\$250 million annually by some estimates.

Before he sparked an artistic revolution, Nnebue was an electronics dealer living in Lagos. He found himself with thousands of empty VHS tapes to offload. With several friends and a cheap camera, he shot a short film to fill the space, and perhaps attract customers. The result, *Living in Bondage*, told the story of a man who kills his wife in

exchange for a lifetime of vast wealth. Her unhappy ghost keeps him “in bondage” thereafter.

Released in 1992, the campy, Igbo-language film was a fluke—but as disruptive as the Hollywood shift from silent film to sound, or black and white to color. The preexisting national theater and performance culture found a larger outlet for its work. Nigerians saw themselves on film and loved it. Needless to say, Nnebue sold all of his cassette tapes. More importantly, he opened a market of 300 million eyeballs.

It’s hard to believe that many millions of people haven’t heard of Nollywood; to me, it’s as familiar as the smell of shea butter at the beauty parlors where I twist and braid my hair. (Some American salons catering to African women blast all Nollywood, all the time.) I always enjoy the guilty pleasure of watching the latest titles, sucking my teeth with the other clients at dramatic inflection points.

Nollywood movies and soap serials, produced on the cheap and sold locally as home videos (only a handful ever meet a silver screen), are known for melodrama: rolled eyes, wagging necks, and pointed fingers. Beyond the Faustian bargain of *Bondage*, other classic tropes—boy meets girl—are subverted when the girl is barren, or possessed by the devil, or confronts her husband’s second wife. Other timeless fables, as when the country mouse hits the city, take on a special significance in a place where recent rural-to-urban migrations have utterly shaken the African social and economic fabric.

The vast majority of Nollywood films are riven with tradition, moralism, superstition, and corresponding godliness—whether Islamic or Christian. More recently, romantic and buddy comedies, heist flicks and gangster dramas, have taken hold of the local imagination. Popular, of-the-moment films like *BlackBerry Babes* (about a maven of women and their smartphone-driven adventures) spawn quick-and-dirty sequels (among my favorite comedies: *Jenifa*, *Jenifa 2*, *The Return of Jenifa*, *The Return of Jenifa 2*).

Until recently, the films have been universally low budget, taking between \$40,000 and \$200,000 to finance. Unable to fight the tide of copyright violations and piracy—an ecosystem as robust as 419—movie producers skimp on the front end, scraping together just

enough to make and distribute a film. It’s no wonder that many are shot in a week, or that a romantic dinner in one offering is staged in the same apartment as a death scene in another.

But the key innovation of Nollywood was never making movies. After all, incumbent studios in the United States had it covered. Selling pirated copies of Disney or Bruce Willis flicks was and remains a brisk business. Rather, Nollywood’s innovation was customizing film offerings for a local audience. By offering a more relevant product, shot in local languages as well as English, Nollywood cannibalized an existing market and ran away with it.

For two decades, the industry grew exponentially. Once the barriers to entry had been breached, creatives churned out hits and employed a vast network of hawkers to sell them. Dozens of market clusters sprang up as centers of scripting, editing, printing, and sales. Hundreds of actors and actresses became household names. Thousands of lighting and sound experts, cinematographers, screenwriters, and film editors honed their skills. Digital production democratized the game further. Twenty years after *Bondage*, the highest-grossing Nigerian movie of all time, *Ije*, sold 200,000 copies on the first day it was released and made about \$400,000 at the box office. Like 419 scams, the lo-fi, bare-bones, backdoor film economy turned out to be a moneymaker.

The experience of watching a film, however, never changed. Gradually, individuals, some of whom owned VHS machines, could afford DVD players at home. But for the most part, films had to be caught in public, communally, at TV kiosks, “video parlors,” or in pubs. From the 1980s until 2004, Lagos didn’t have a single movie theater. Elsewhere in Africa, especially outside of big cities, pop-up community cinemas brought a traveling carnival approach to screening films, both African and Western. Informal distribution methods dominated.

Jason Njoku decided to leapfrog the status quo. A serial entrepreneur with a string of failed business ideas behind him, he had slunk from London to his mother’s home in Nigeria in 2010. He noticed her penchant for Nigerian content rather than quintessentially British soaps like *EastEnders*. That same year, he launched iROKOTv. The model was simple: acquire rights to African films and put them online.

The venture started with a YouTube channel and quickly developed its own streaming service. “Netflix for Nollywood” now has a library of six-thousand-plus African movies accessible to global subscribers.*

Local viewing is hobbled by what a friend calls “African bandwidth anorexia,” but as Web connections proliferate, there’s no telling how wide an audience iROKO will find. Certainly, the market is no longer limited to Nigeria and its diaspora; Ghana, Kenya, and other English-speaking African countries have developed their own insurgent film industries.

Other African film distributors like Buni, Wabona, and AfricaFilms.tv are growing, too. The future of Nollywood looks to be a *kaniyu* fusion of old and new: digital ventures hack an established film infrastructure — itself a mash-up of the Nigerian theater tradition and Hollywood flash. As with the 419 explosion, Nollywood pioneers made something very big from something very small. And, of course, the whole industry would evaporate but for the cadre of self-employed directors, writers, and producers, hustling constantly to make audiences laugh, cry, and pay up.

This anything-goes agility is better called “resilience,” now a term of art in sociological circles. It’s a shorthand for bouncing back from crisis — whether genocide, drought, or reckless investing. And it has deep, neurobiological roots. The amygdala portion of the brain is constantly scanning for dangers, perceived or real. It’s a smoke detector of sorts, helping humans determine whether we are at risk.

Unlike a conventional smoke detector, the amygdala acclimates to your life experiences. As with the body’s immune system, there’s an ideal balance between nonchalance and defensive responses. And with greater exposure to stresses, our window of tolerance grows, and resilience develops. Some academic literature calls this attribute “hardiness,” or “grit” — a character trait in high demand at places from West Point military academy to today’s global job market.

* In 2011, iROKO spun out a similar service for African musicians — also blindingly popular in local and diaspora markets, but largely unknown in the West.

It’s also something kids grow up with in Africa. In my time crisscrossing the continent, rural and urban, I often saw schoolchildren as young as three or four years old walking in neat lines to and from school. Daily, the kids span epic distances — 1, 5, 10 kilometers — along roads alternately dusty and lonely, full of traffic or softened by rains. When my mother was growing up in Nigeria, she had no official curfew; she was told to come home only when it was too dark to see the lines on her palm.

Helicopter parents in fat economies might be horrified to let their children so far off the leash. But African children walk together, without setting off the smoke detector, because they can handle the challenge. Author Paul Tough looked closely at young Americans who were not the smartest in their classes but had, through will and persistence, made it from poor neighborhoods all the way through college. He saw what I see in these young Africans: “For young people without the benefit of a lot of family resources, without the kind of safety net that their wealthier peers enjoyed, [grit] seemed an indispensable part of making it to graduation day.”

While important, this uncomplaining dynamism and perseverance don’t tell the whole story. Resilience is inherently conservative — focused on bouncing back to a prior status quo. *Kanju*, by contrast, is generative — it’s about catapulting ahead. And in my experience, to get ahead in Africa, you sometimes need to play naughty.

The continent’s entire commuter culture, for example, runs on collective insolence. As day breaks and as dusk falls, those who can afford a lift cluster at junctions across Africa, waiting for *matatu* buses — fourteen-person vans that run hundreds of kilometers per day, along vaguely determined routes, without formal schedules and for fares subject to negotiation. The often-flamboyant décor varies according to the taste of the owner. Many *matatus* boast loud paint and prayer beads, louder reggae music — even back-seat television screens. “Al-lahu Akbar,” read one taxi bumper in Douala. “Follow us on Twitter,” read another in Nairobi.

The word *matatu* (roughly “30 cents” in Swahili) comes from the affordable 1950s price of a lift along Kenyan roads. *Matatus*, Nigerian

darfos, Tanzanian *dala-dalas*, Cameroonian *7-places* (the generous inventory of seats in a standard sedan), Mozambican *shapap* — whatever the local term, these vehicles are the primary means of conveyance for millions of Africans with places to go and minimal disposable income. In some cities, the official state-run buses roll by like staid battleships; in most towns, there is no centralized system for moving people, in bulk and at speed. (When living in Uganda, I hailed motor-bike taxis so often I took to carrying around my own helmet.)

Matatus likewise fill the gap in nimble, madcap fashion. Other drivers loathe them — understandably. They honk through traffic jams; they hug the curb when so moved; on the open road, they routinely test the mettle of drivers in the opposite lane. Usually the conductor is hanging out of the open sliding door, banging the hull of the van like a jockey, exhorting potential passengers to join the fun.

Transportation in Africa is an unprecedented running experiment in informal economic activity. The cacophony of engines, the constant pinballing of coins and bills, and the reckless merges into traffic have evolved entirely outside the action of the state. Transit is at once a private-sector activity and a massive public good. With minimalist regulations (save shakedowns from the police), the industry in Kenya has swelled to an estimated fleet of thirty thousand vehicles that move millions annually.

Matatus anchor the informal sector that is by definition unregistered, undocumented, and partially excluded from official GDP statistics. It's tempting to think of informality as a symptom of backwardness and disorganization, but the reverse is true. In 2009, a South African Web company called Mocality dispatched an army of agents to walk the streets of Nairobi, collecting basic information from local vendors in order to start an online business directory. Some forty thousand shopkeepers were asked to name their services, their telephone number — and a landmark that would help customers find them.

A startling trend emerged. In a city of four million residents, almost everyone *agreed* about which physical landmarks matter. Everyone in a given district relied on the Globe Cinema, the Caltex petrol station, the South C mosque, the iconic I&M skyscraper, and the like. Like-

wise, everyone can tell you the rush hour surcharge for a *matatu* ride, or the going rate for roadside sugar cane, cut into neat chunks and sold to commuters with a sweet tooth.

As with high-context navigation, the strength and prevalence of these informal norms distinguish African economies — and are bedrock components of *kanju*. While industrial history and “modernization” theory tend to glorify organization, institutionalism, taxation, legitimacy, and the rejection of informality, many millions of Africans live every day as a rebuke to this logic.

But why? For the people of all ages self-employed as farmers, filmmakers, day laborers, vendors, drivers, contractors, and the like, the informal economy experience builds vital skills, in arbitrage, innovation, and risk assessment. As compared with richer regions, African informality is acyclical; the gray economy not only provides work in lean times but actually expands during times of economic growth. Often, informal-sector industries are interlinked: one vendor sells used electronics; his neighbor repairs them when they break. It's a remarkably consistent source of employment that, like water in a jar of pebbles, fills every conceivable gap in labor.

There are plenty of tough neighborhoods in which the formal sector does not fully support the labor force. Globally, the gray economy is estimated to be worth \$10 trillion; if it were a country, it would be in the top five by wealth. And even in more developed countries, part-time jobs, dog-walking services, jitney cabs, and carpooling schemes are signs of the deformation of twenty-first-century goods and services.

But in many places in sub-Saharan Africa, the informal economy is the *only* economy — generating, on average, more than half of all economic activity. Movies and transit are the tip of the iceberg. In Lagos, a study by the Institute for Liberty and Democracy determined that nearly 94 percent of the city's businesses operated outside of the law. This labor is worth \$50 billion — bigger than both annual foreign assistance to Nigeria (\$11.4 billion) and foreign investment (\$5.4 billion).

More importantly, development practice tends to overlook this parallel economy. A significant body of experts would prefer that Africans

simply color between the lines. Enforceable contracts, property rights, even traffic lights have positive effects on development. But the integrity of Africa's formal institutions is everywhere in doubt — often, as we'll see in the next chapter, with good reason. Consequently, there's a well-defined relationship between rules and the avoidance thereof. All of the vibrant, unusual innovations we'll see in this book are a response to flawed formal avenues for action and expression.

The regional gift for clever hacking exists in part because national leaders have *also* been breaking the rules, even as they are supposed to make and enforce them. Despite the fanfare and spotlight on leadership, Mohammed Ibrahim's \$5 million prize for good governance hasn't been awarded for four out of the seven years it has existed. Everywhere, writes Steve Daniels in his book *Making Do*, "the formal institutions we take for granted — law, finance and education — have failed the self-employed manufacturers and traders of the informal sector, who have in turn used great ingenuity and drive to invent mechanisms of production and trade appropriate for a huge popula-



In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, a roadside fence presents a sales opportunity.

tion of workers." In this climate, *kanju* is not just a means to get by; it is a secondary effect of ineffective central government.

The flip side of informality is corruption, one of the biggest challenges for Africa. The wide reach of graft and rent seeking in regional government will be detailed in the next chapter. But *kanju* is different from simply breaking the rules; it's about coming up with a totally different game. In this conception, informality is more of an escape valve than a corrosive force. In Ghana, *kanju* naughtiness has been a tool to attack the worst types of corruption at their source.

Like most of the entrepreneurs we'll meet, Anas Aremeyaw Anas prefers to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. On a busy side street in Accra, a floppy bucket hat is the only indication that this young Ghanaian has embroiled himself in some of the biggest anticorruption investigations in the country. He wears the hat to keep his face from sight. For a vigilante, overexposure is dangerous.

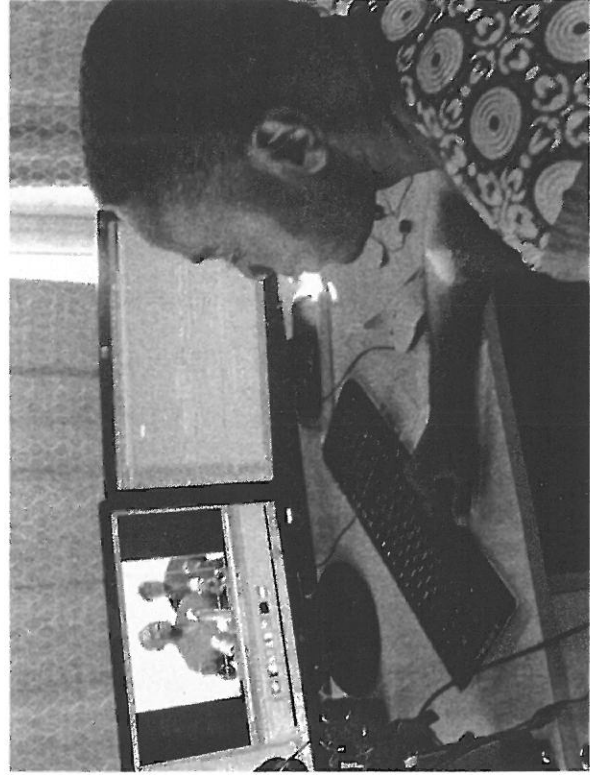
Anas, known to the public mainly by one name, practices a brand of journalism committed to radical transparency. I report stories armed with a tape recorder, paper, and pen; the soft-spoken Anas uses hidden cameras, microphones, wigs, costumes, and any other means necessary to throw sunlight on corruption in Ghana. A story on bad flour shut down a local biscuit factory. A story on widespread identity fraud sped Ghana's change to biometric passports. A six-month investigation and exposé of the Chinese role in Ghana's sex trade earned him the Norbert Zongo Prize for investigative journalism in 2009.

Unlike most journalists, Anas often casts himself as both reporter and source — as his own Deep Throat. "In my kind of journalism, the key ingredient is to name, shame, and jail," he explains. And so one of his favorite words is *incontrovertible* — a way of describing the meticulous multimedia proofs he marshals over the course of his investigations.

Over seven months, he went undercover at the Osu Children's Home, a state-run orphanage in Accra. Posing as Rev. Abednego Akpabli, local preacher, and Hajia Barkisu, a female trader from Mali, Anas filmed abuses and mismanagement, from locking kids in pens

for minor misbehavior to stealing food from their table. When the story broke, the public first gobbled up the sensational drama and then demanded action. Shamefaced, the government cobbled together a committee chaired by the minister of employment and social welfare to test the allegations in the report—the main points of which were corroborated. When President Obama gave a speech to the Ghanaian parliament in 2009, he mentioned Anas as a “courageous journalist” who “risked his life to report the truth.”

Anas, whose laconic real-life persona makes his pantomimes and daring seem implausible, also runs a private investigations service called Tiger Eye. He considers himself an equal-opportunity exposé. Neither business cartels nor government ministries are immune. After the first string of successful investigations, the Ghanaian government enlisted him to collect evidence about cocoa smuggling between Ghana and neighboring Côte d’Ivoire. The regulator had deployed police and other ministries responsible for border control, to no avail.



An assistant edits videos for Tiger Eye, the investigations firm and film studio run by Anas Aremeyaw Anas in Accra, Ghana.

“It was clear that the state was in trouble. The state security agencies couldn’t solve it,” says Anas. After a few weeks of investigation, he found that rent-seeking police forces were the problem. “The security men we were provided to do the work were instead taking money from our own farmers and allowing them to smuggle cocoa out of Ghana.”

Anas publishes his findings in local newspapers and has begun producing feature-length DVDs, sold alongside Nollywood dramas. They aren’t the slickest productions, but they pack heat; when we met, he was working on a documentary about revenue leakages in the import and export business. With four months of secret footage gathered at ports across Ghana’s coast, he was building a comparative analysis of what Ghana’s government borrows from donors, how much is actually given to residents, and how bribes grease countless palms at the borders. The working title of the film: *Enemies of the State*.

With the naughtiness inherent to *kanju*, Anas is twisting the rules of reporting in order to enforce the rule of law. At times, he is also breaking the law—he’s been accused of violating privacy rights and other unethical reporting practices. “I admit that I break the law, but eventually it’s always in the public interest,” he told me, adding that few others are committing time and resources to the transparency beat. Acting out is his way of making change.

Throughout this book, we will return to this theme. We will see, over and over again, mischievous, counterintuitive, and in many cases unprecedented solutions to complex problems born of bad alternatives. Not every person in Africa—or anywhere—has the capacity for the risk taking, creativity, and hustle that characterize *kanju*. But in the cases we’ll examine, *kanju* naughtiness is not a liability. It’s an asset that often means the difference between suffering and survival.

So rather than deleting 419 e-mails—well, we should probably delete the e-mails—we need to think harder about how and why opportunity looks so different in a lean economy, why so many Africans, held hostage to less functional institutions, play fast and loose with rules. This creative destruction, in the face of frustration, corruption, and in many cases real need, presents a learning opportunity.

THE BRIGHT CONTINENT DAYO OLOPADE

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RULES &
MAKING CHANGE**

IN

MODERN

AFRICA



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