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The Bright Continent: Breaking Rules And Making Change In Modern Africa



Synopsis

• "New York Times Book Review "For anyone who wants to understand how the African economy really works, The Bright Continent is a good place to start." • "Reuters Dayo Olopade knew from personal experience that Western news reports on conflict, disease, and poverty obscure the true story of modern Africa. And so she crossed sub-Saharan Africa to document how ordinary people deal with their daily challenges. She found what cable news ignores: a continent of ambitious reformers and young social entrepreneurs, driven by creativity born of African difficulty. It's a trait found in pioneers like Kenneth Nnebue, who turned cheap VHS tapes into the multimillion-dollar film industry Nollywood. Or Ushahidi, a technology collective that crowdsources citizen activism and disaster relief. A shining counterpoint to the conventional wisdom, The Bright Continent rewrites Africa's challenges as opportunities to innovate, and celebrates a history of doing more with less as a powerful model for the rest of the world." [An] upbeat study of development in Africa... The book is written more in wonder at African ingenuity than in anger at foreign incomprehension." • "The New Yorker

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Customer Reviews

• "New York Times Book Review "A hopeful narrative about a continent on the rise." • "New York Times Book Review " [An] upbeat study of development in Africa |Despite evident exasperation at Western interventions that fail to adapt to local systems, the book is written more in wonder at African ingenuity than in anger at foreign incomprehension." •

• "The New Yorker" [A] sweeping new work | A very ambitious book. • "Michel Martin, Tell Me More" "An excellent introduction to contemporary sub-Saharan African society and the region's economy. Olopade's optimism is refreshing." • "Foreign Affairs" "Olopade invites her readers to peer past the biases that inform western stereotypes of Africa and Africans | It's time for the West to start looking for smart investments in the continent's abundant pool of intelligence and energy." • "Boston Globe" "Olopade seamlessly traverses the continent, threading a narrative that shows how African innovation is playing a vital role in its own development." • "Pittsburgh Post-Gazette" "Olopade gives a face to African entrepreneurship, and her suggestion that Africa can be the guidepost for how the world should tighten its fiscal belt and aim for the notch marked Africa is exciting." • "The Root" "Olopade has a slew of insights that will feel spot-on to anyone familiar with Africa" or, for that matter, with almost any developing economy | [The Bright Continent] is an optimistic vision, and one that's steadily gaining traction in policy debates." • "Bookforum" "An ode to the virtues of the small in economics" [Olopade] gives a multitude of examples and a huge mass of fascinating detail. Her case is persuasive | For anyone who wants to understand how the African economy really works, The Bright Continent is a good place to start." • "Reuters" "Bright Continent will change your view of Africa. It's that simple. Dayo Olopade looks with the eyes of a first-generation Nigerian-American and sees a landscape of ingenuity, technological innovation, and grit. A lively and enjoyable read." • "Anne-Marie Slaughter, President and CEO of the New America Foundation and Professor Emerita of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University" "Dayo Olopade has written a book that bracingly lives up to its title. In it, an Africa we are all too unaccustomed to seeing comes vividly to life thanks to her restless eye and keen curiosity. It is one of local solutions born of necessity and local heroes who arise from even the most fragile soil." • "Howard French, Associate Professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and author of A Continent for the Taking" "This book captures the complex thoughts of a whole generation of young Africans. Olopade shows Africa as it is, a complicated space occupied by real people with the desire and the power to shape our futures." • "Uzodinma Iweala, author of Beasts of No Nation" "The Bright Continent is a long overdue and much needed corrective to the dominant perception of Africa. It is a book loaded with revelations of heroic, and often ingenious lives, all of which are eloquently and poignantly brought to life through Dayo's brilliant observations." • "Dinaw Mengestu, author of All Our Names" "The Bright Continent is an absolute brightness. Sidestepping dead-end debates, the indefatigable Olopade maps out a contemporary Africa which is vital and self-reliant. Her definition of the Yoruba term

kanju as 'specific creativity born from African difficulty'; will enter the English language. Through strong reporting and clear thinking, Olopade demonstrates how to improve the lives of African youth stuck in a purgatory of 'waithood.' This is essential reading." — J.M. Ledgard, longtime Africa correspondent, *The Economist* — "A new mental and strategic landscape, one based on possibilities, not merely perils. We should be grateful to Olopade." — *The Plain Dealer* — "A painstakingly researched and lively tour of the people, institutions, and ideas currently at work on the continent." — *The Africa Report* — "An exhilarating book. [Olopade's] style is refreshingly breezy, and displays an inherent confidence that belies her youth. As this book successfully illustrates, the continent is following a trajectory that, despite all the ongoing challenges, is steadily in ascendance." — *African Business Magazine* — "A refreshingly hopeful argument, well-grounded in data and observation." — *Kirkus* —

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I preordered the book and received it this morning. I read it with great excitement as fast as I could -- and was not disappointed. Through this well-written book, Olopade is shattering the dominant Western perception of Africa as a poor and corrupt continent prone to disease and famine. She vividly describes how the entire African continent is teeming with ingenious entrepreneurs who can overcome great adversity to create frugal and sustainable solutions for their local communities. These modern-day alchemists are able to transmute constraints into opportunity and generate greater social value at lower cost. Their secret weapon, according to Olopade, is "kanju" -- a frugal, flexible, and inclusive mindset that enables them to see the glass as always half full and do much more with a lot less. This resourceful kanju spirit reminds me of *jugaad* -- a Hindi word meaning the gutsy ability to improvise cost-effective solutions with limited resources in adverse circumstances. In my own book, I described how millions of grassroots entrepreneurs in India apply *jugaad* to overcome their every day challenges. These Indian entrepreneurs would be thrilled to discover, through Olopade's book, that their African brothers and sisters are equally pioneering a new approach to innovating faster, better, and cheaper. In the West, this new frugal and flexible approach is being called "frugal innovation" and is gradually gaining traction in the academic and corporate world. I strongly encourage entrepreneurs, CEOs, academics, and policy-makers in the West to read *The Bright Continent* to understand how Africa is a breeding ground of frugal innovation -- and provides the entire world a proven blueprint for building inclusive and sustainable economies.

It starts with the title itself "Dayo Olopade's challenge to the prevailing sentiment that sub-Saharan Africa today is little different in its essence from the 'dark continent' perceived by nineteenth century colonialists. In *The Bright Continent*, Olopade catalogs an impressive number of innovative businesses, social sector ventures, and even an occasional government initiative that contribute to the fast growth of this long-underestimated region. To put Olopade's story in context, the World Bank recently announced that economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to rise from 4.7 percent in 2013 to 5.2 percent in 2014, compared to 3.5 percent globally. And the CIA World Factbook lists eight African countries among the twenty fast-growing nations in the world in 2013. However, these numbers must be interpreted with caution, since the measurement of economic indicators in most countries in the region is notoriously unreliable (as economist William Easterly reminded us in *The Tyranny of Experts*), and growth in GDP or even GDP per capita doesn't necessarily mean that life is getting better for the seventy percent of sub-Saharan Africans (600 million) who live on \$2 a day or less. Still, there is clearly a lot going on in Africa these days, and it's time for the world to pay much closer attention. Olopade, a first-generation Nigerian-American whose parents, both physicians, have roots in rural Nigeria, brings a fresh and well-grounded perspective to the project. She refuses to accede to conventional word usage, rejecting terms such as 'developing country', 'emerging nation', 'poor country', and 'rich country' in favor of her own constructions. One is the term 'fail state', connoting a country whose government fails to deliver essential services but is not a 'failed state' which she applies only to Somalia. Another is the distinction between 'lean economies' and 'fat economies'. (You can guess which is which. Not a bad way to look at things, is it?) She also organizes her material around a clever device she calls mapping, relating new developments in terms of five 'maps' that dominate the reality of Africa today: Family, Technology, Commerce, Nature, and Youth. These five maps 'showcase the unique institutions that bind black Africa together and are building its bright future,' Olopade writes. Permeating the book is the concept of *kanju*, a term in the Nigerian language Yoruba that the author loosely translates as 'hustle', 'strive', 'know how', or 'make do'. In practice, *kanju* means bending the rules and devising workarounds—a concept similar to the Hindi and Urdu term *jugaad*, which also is often used to characterize the unconventional solutions that people come up with out of necessity. Here are just a few of the many recent ventures featured in *The Bright Continent*, every one of them an example of *kanju* in

action:** EGG-energy (Tanzania) wires homes and businesses and furnishes them with reliable electricity using rechargeable batteries, charged at central locations where customers exchange them for new ones at half the cost of energy from the local (highly unreliable) grid.** MPedigree and Sproxil (piloted in Ghana) use scratch-off codes with a phone number a customer may text to learn whether a medicine is authentic in a region where thirty percent of drugs are counterfeit.** M-PESA (Kenya) provides two-thirds of Kenya's population with a banking and person-to-person funds transfer service using text messaging on mobile phones.** Bridge International Academies (Kenya) operates hundreds of bare-bones private schools that offer consistent, quality education for \$5 per child per month, supplanting ineffective and unreliable public schools. Olopade emphasizes that virtually everywhere in the region, national governments are a constant impediment to development progress, typically ignored if possible and almost universally disdained. (She reports that ninety-two percent of the businesses in Lagos, Nigeria's largest city with a population now estimated at 21 million, operate outside the law.) Rwanda is an outlier. There, the autocratic government of Paul Kagame enforces rapid and orderly development free of corruption in a pattern similar to that of Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore in decades past. Visitors to Rwanda, including friends of mine, note the surprise they registered when they learned that everything works there. The country is on a fast track toward middle income despite (some might say because of) a lack of high-priced natural resources. The author does have blind spots. I detected a couple of errors in her reporting, and, more consequentially, she seems to have been bamboozled by Columbia economist Jeffrey Sachs, the driving force behind the ill-fated Millennium Villages Project. Olopade refers to the project respectfully, although the available evidence points to the effort as a dismal failure. (The full story is told beautifully and authoritatively by Nina Munk in *The Idealist*, a biography of Dr. Sachs that focuses on the village project.) In researching this book, Olopade, a journalist, spent many months traveling across the continent to observe the promising changes underway and interview the bright, resourceful, and usually young innovators who are creating change in one of the world's most tradition-bound areas.

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