

Excavating silence: Let them eat bread or vetkoek

In *Kasinomic Revolution* I wrote this story about a couple I called Golden Delicious who sold vetkoek in downtown Joburg. They're not there now, the streets of downtown Joburg are silent and deserted ...

It's 1am, Meadowlands, Soweto. The alarm on the scratched old Samsung beeps endlessly. Mbandze reaches over his wife Veronika's sleeping body and switches it off. Nudging her awake, he walks into the kitchen of the tiny two-room backroom and switches on the electric kettle for tea and to fill the two plastic basins he and his wife use separately for washing, standing in the basins.

After quickly drinking their tea while they get dressed, they walk into the room next door which serves as both lounge and kitchen. The ten plastic 25-litre drums of dough they mixed before bedtime at 8pm the night before are lined up there. They transfer the risen dough into 6,25-litre buckets and close them tightly. Veronika packs a cooler box with Parmalat Cheese Slices, sliced polony, fried fish pieces and long-life milk. While she is packing the cooler box Mbandze has walked out to the street a few times taking the buckets out. Throwing two clean aprons into their bag, the two walk out into the narrow township street. It's 1.45am when



a 16-seater Toyota taxi pulls up. The two of them take a whole bench seat in the taxi, with their six buckets and cooler. Wordlessly, Mbandze pays the

driver R48 as the taxi wheezes and sways along on its worn shock absorbers to Noord taxi rank in downtown Joburg. It's cold and dark except for the

dim street lights and the brighter light of the old Springbok Hotel entrance.

It's 2.30am when they alight to find the guy from the storeroom waiting at their small section of pavement with a trolley. They pay R30 a week to have their table, gas cylinders, pots and kettles stored. Mbandze nods silently at the trolley pusher and, unloading their items, he sets up his cooking area while Veronika lays out their wares on the table: tea and coffee, sugar and milk, polystyrene cups, a Tupperware containing the cheese and polony slices and the large basin ready for the amagwinya.

By 3am the first vetkoek are frying into a delicious golden brown, and the crowds start passing by. Downtown Joburg is a frenetic mix of slums, corporate head offices of banks, and government buildings – the first and third worlds slammed together in a heaving uncomfortable mess, the rich resenting the poor, the poor aspiring for just a tiny fraction of what the rich have.

More than half a million commuters stream to and from Park Station daily and many stop at Mbandze's table top. His hands moving in a blur Mbandze grabs handfuls of dough and expertly beads each into a perfectly round and identically sized lump and drops them into the boiling hot cooking oil in a huge aluminium pot on the little Cadac stove.

Two hundred golden brown vetkoek fry at a time before they are poured into a large plastic bowl where a frenzy of hands reaches out, buying the vetkoek with a Parmalat cheese slice melting



into the hot dough, or a fried slice of polony, or a cup of tea or coffee. Mbandze and Veronika start selling their vetkoek at 3am and by 10am they have sold 3 000 at R1 each. They make a margin of about 40% earning themselves up to and above of R30 000 a month, a hard but a good living.

Across the street Moipane Mahlakwane sells 6 000 vetkoek for R1 each. She's 24 and moved to Jo'burg from Limpopo some three years ago, searching for a job, fame and fortune. She could not find a job and so inspired by her mother, found fortune selling vetkoek. Selling 6 000 vetkoek a day at a rand each, she earns her a good income and now employs four staff.

See Kyknet profile https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWVJ1Uolaw8&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3KLuwAD7XuhPQQ9rhwXlAanYltH-LXHrL5S2BH2m9M3i3IroOvQ_JWZY



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Both Mbandze and Moipane's businesses are closed today. They operate in the inner city, the lifeblood of their business is commuters and office workers grabbing the Mzansi breakfast croissant, vetkoek, on their way to work. I weep for them but I suspect they will be back in force once the cities and the streets return to normal.



Meanwhile in Soweto another Kasinomic Revolutionary is not letting the lockdown put him down! Refiloe Rantekoa grew up in White City, one of the toughest and poorest suburbs of Soweto, epitomised by concrete rooved homes looking like air raid bunkers. When I started visiting Soweto in the late 80's I was warned about White City. Apparently in White City if you saw a bunch of guys fighting, it was because they were fighting over who would mug you. My friend Ike Mosiuoa said, "GG when you ask the gogos for directions, they reach into their breasts, pull out an Okapi knife, flick it open and draw directions in the dust for you!"



Refiloe was eight when he started selling vetkoek with his gogo. He would wake up early and they would sell before he went to school, heading off to school from the little bucket of vetkoek on the dusty sidewalk.

Finishing matric Refiloe could not find a job so started printing and selling T shirts with African maps, or local heroes like Mandela. His little

backroom, a one room tiny space behind the main house in White City, was his printing studio, lounge, kitchen and bedroom! Some years on Refiloe got a learnership and later a job in the hospitality and tourism industry. It was a great job in a world where no one has formal jobs, but "business was in my blood" he tells me.



“While I was working I was thinking and researching, what business could I make my mark by starting. A business I could scale up.” He continues, “Even at work I was selling to the people at work, like *ama-aachar* (atchar), even happy socks, and boxes of Kellogg’s cereal.”

Then the memory of his now deceased gogo, drove him towards baking. In between his work at the office, Refiloe designed a bakery logo, staff T-shirts and started researching the cost of equipment. He started selling his bread too, not real bread though! “I said to people and to kota outlets, I am going to sell bread soon, will you buy, how many loaves, what price.” He laughs, “I sold lots of bread like that, but I was selling something that I don’t have. But that was my research, advertising into *engekho* (something non-existent).”

At the same time Refiloe got a personal loan, using his payslip. “I borrowed R 50 000 and I bought baking equipment. I just stored it in my little backroom. It sat there for a while though.”

And so Borotho Bakery was born, a virtual business, a young man’s dream plus a pile of baking equipment crammed into a backroom alongside a little bed in White City.

Then people were saying, “Hey, where is that bread, they were serious, and I realised I need to be serious too. Yo, the pressure was building up and up. But space was the problem. Where could I start this bakery?”

That’s when he decided he would use his backroom bedroom behind his grandmother’s

house as the bakery. He had nowhere to stay, so “I went back to my family home, and said can I stay here, I slept on the floor in the dining room for a while.”

So in 2016, at first baking only 20 loaves of bread a day, Borotho bakery went from virtual business to reality. Refiloe started selling just up and down



his street, “At that stage we did not think about making a profit, just to get the business going.” Using WhatsApp, Refiloe started getting more and more orders, six loaves here, two there. More and more streets started buying his bread. Then the





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kota outlets started ordering. (A *Kota* named after a quarter loaf of bread, is the township hamburger, a bit like a bunny chow but with chips, polony cheese slice inside vs a curry.) And the pressure mounted on Refiloe and his two baking partners. All the while Refiloe was also in a full-time job. He had no choice – he was servicing the R50 000 loan he had used to start the business.

By the end of 2016, Refiloe had more and more orders, so they sourced some trolleys *kasi stayela*. He laughs when I ask how he sourced these, “You know, *mos ekasi!*” His trolleys delivered up and down streets, business was looking good, they were selling about 350 loaves of bread a day. Trolley vegetable sellers with their trademark bicycle bell are common in the townships streets, bread sellers are not. Refiloe was learning and adapting his business to kasi dynamics. All of this still from Refiloe’s grandmother’s backroom.

Towards the end of 2017 to early 2018 Refiloe had been feverishly entering every entrepreneur competition or initiative he could find. One prize got them money to buy a small truck and a shipping container. “Ya, space is an issue *ekasi*,” he says. The shipping container was squeezed onto the tiny residential property in White City, just in front of the backroom. And that’s where Borothon Bakery is operating today. Smiling ruefully, he says, “It’s very spacious compared to where we were operating before.” How’s that for perspective – a shipping container is spacious. I guess when your premises were a backroom, then its huge!

“It’s now very professional,” he says, without



a hint of irony. “We have a sign and people can see where we are.” Borothon bakery’s truck delivers, but he has just restarted the trolley sellers. “We designed stronger trolleys,” he says. “The supermarket ones don’t work on the kasi streets”. So with new trolleys and branded umbrellas proudly shouting out Borothon Bakery, four trolley sellers walk the streets every day. Orders still flood in via Whatsapp and the trolleys rattle down the tiny kasi streets selling or delivering.

And then came the lockdown! Borothon bakery lost 25% of their business immediately, some of it from the closing of fast food sector, primarily the kota outlets, plus a large client at Baragwanath hospital. But the trolleys are picking up the business. Refiloe got an essential service permit and now each trolley and the truck are focussing on residential sales. He’s upbeat, optimistic, he has a plan, a strategy. “We were becoming too much traditional in the way we were doing business,” he says. “So I want to do things differently.” He planned to have 10 trolleys but the lockdown closed his supplier, so his trolley sellers just walk further. “We now have orders as far as Rockville,

even Dube, so the guys can walk about 10, even 15km’s, a day.” Each trolley has a permit, gloves, a mask and sanitiser. “They engage with a lot of people, so its important that we do the right thing,” he says proudly.

Refiloe has a recurring dream, it’s a dream of space, space to grow his bakery. He has woven magic with the tiny space cast his way, starting Borothon bakery in a space no larger than a townhouse kitchen, squeezing a container into a tiny Soweto yard. Imagine the magic he can weave, the loaves he can bake if he has space. “There are so many spaces with closed stores *ekasi*, but we can’t get those places! Maybe the government should help and take these that are not working and make them available to us small businesses.”

Refiloe doesn’t want a handout, he’s agile – constantly looking at reinventing his business, enthusiastic and articulate. He knows these kasi streets and these kasi people. Lookout for him, if he gets that space, there is no holding him back, lockdown, or no lockdown! **SR**

<https://www.facebook.com/borothobakery/>



GG Alcock is the author of *Third World Child: White Born Zulu Bred*, *KasiNomics: African Informal Economies and the People Who Inhabit Them*, and *Kasinomic Revolution: The Rise of African Informal Economies*. He is the founder of Minanawe Marketing and is a specialist in informal & Kasi (township) economies, marketing and route to market strategies. Visit www.ggalcock.com





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