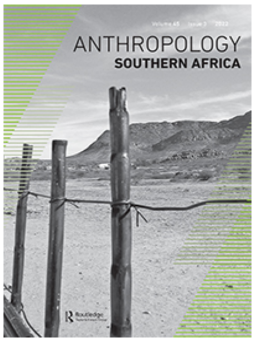

Anthropology Southern Africa

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rasa20

Reimagining money: Kenya in the digital finance revolution

by Sibel Kusimba, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2021, 240 pp., US$ 28.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781503614413.

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Anthropology Southern Africa, 2022: 195–207

BOOK REVIEWS

Reimagining money: Kenya in the digital finance revolution, by Sibel Kusimba, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2021, 240 pp., US$ 28.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781503614413.

Reimagining Money: Kenya in the Digital Finance Revolution is an impressive monograph. Kusimba, who hails from the United States of America (USA), migrates between her place of employment in the USA and East Africa, where she does field research and relational work. This configuration of the work–home dynamic produced useful ethnographic encounters "in the field" with research respondents and family alike. Her Kenyan kin introduced her to mobile devices and applications that link ordinary Kenyans to the digital finance revolution and taught her to use new mobile payment technologies. As such, her relations with her Kenyan kin drew her into this revolution as participant, not mere bystander. A longitudinal study of sorts, some of it the product of collaboration with other researchers and published previously, the bulk of the research was conducted in rural western Kenya, complimented with some data made in Nairobi.

The book starts by introducing the reader to a linear narrative presented to the author by the former governor of the Central Bank of Kenya about traditional African money, its replacement by colonial money, and the possible futures of money in Kenya, the home of Silicon Valley's African cousin. The author returns to this narrative throughout the book, deploying it as a useful device to stitch together the arguments running through the chapters. The former governor's narrative is examined and re-examined against empirical material and existing scholarship. The first section of the book offers some historical perspective on the origins of the revolution under investigation, and an examination of competing narratives about digital money and M-Pesa specifically, including the role of Silicon Savanna innovators who are "charting an African path to money" (31). The middle part of the book presents evidence about the rural and urban users of digital money, often utilising social network analysis, including data made through participants drawing their own social networks and mapping digital money transfers. Finally, the book concludes with a critical discussion of the author's role as a consultant in a Kenyan fintech start-up, with the former governor (and his son) making a final appearance.

In a fascinating chapter titled "Airtime Money," Kusimba writes about her encounters with airtime in the early 2000s in Kenya, including using it to establish rapport with research participants (16). She argues that the ways in which Kenyans used airtime, the world's first valuable digital commodity, and repurposed it in ways beyond what its developers had envisaged kickstarted the worldwide digital finance revolution. She acknowledges the role that ordinary Kenyans as users of airtime unknowingly played in accelerating what would become a revolution. As infrastructural improvements in electricity and the internet occurred in Kenya, digital money — together with networks of mobile money agents and users faced with difficulties in transferring money across spread-out urban–rural kin networks — coalesced in Safaricom's near monopoly on money transfers in Kenya.

In the following chapter, "Money Leapfroggers," Kusimba writes about mobile agents as key actors in the digital finance revolution. Together with fintech innovators, these agents participate in and produce competing narratives of leapfrogging and local creativity, often resulting in a bitter techno-politics over who owns, regulates and profits from digital finance (36). She agrees with those scholars who warn that the rhetoric about financial inclusion articulated by a range of actors is propaganda-like. Kusimba also agrees that the consequences of the digital finance revolution are typically "predatory inclusion" rather than the promised "democratization of finance." The digital finance revolution has, for example, given rise to digital debt, digital credit, overdraft services, increased blacklisting and the emergence of a "debt society."

In the chapter "Whose Money Is This?," Kusimba traces the public debate about who could claim the innovation that is M-Pesa, given that ordinary Kenyans' use of airtime money laid the foundations for the development of this commercial product. While her account of M-Pesa is not exhaustive, she recounts how mobile money was launched in Kenya when the Central Bank issued Safaricom a "letter of no objection," allowing the company to provide mobile money services without a full regulatory framework in place (and, importantly, allowing the company to contract mobile money agents). Unfortunately, Kusimba does not adequately think through the implications of this unfolding story of primitive accumulation: a revolution founded on a corporate monopoly, "wilded" in the unregulated markets of the Global South by a subsidiary of a multinational telecommunications company, capturing the value produced by the everyday human economy of (unprotected if creative) ordinary Kenyans. Not many revolutionary situations allow the anthropologist to connect, empirically and theoretically, the everyday lives of research respondents to the funders of the revolution. Arguably, this revolution does. Nevertheless, Kusimba's discussion of "social rifts around cultural wealth" (41) as it relates to M-Pesa is fascinating.

In the chapters titled "Money and Wealth-in-People" and "Heartholds of Mobile Money," Kusimba summarises findings from her research and relates them to the anthropological literature on kinship, households and heartholds, colonial and cash money, the urban–rural nexus, life-cycle rituals, and cattle and bridewealth. Her work shows how mobile money is incorporated into existing social and economic structures and cycles, including the *gorogoro* economy that spans the urban–rural nexus. She also points to the growth in group finance. Here she recounts the ways the ritualised, formalised and bureaucratic logic of rotating savings and credit associations provides Kenyan neighbours, friends and even families with the organisational grammar to overcome the personal and impersonal aspects of money and business Keith Hart (2005) so lucidly analysed. Qualifying the narrative offered by the former governor, Kusimba argues that digital money adds to the repertoire of Kenyan money; it does not replace it. In much the same way that Tiv elders blamed colonial money for destroying spheres of exchange that upheld their authority as senior men, Kenyan elders are suspicious of digital money. As is often the case, the women in Kusimba's ethnography emerge not only as the key nodes in the social networks she analyses but also as the thoughtful masters of digital money, combining care with calculation. Her case studies show the contemporary rituals involving digital money, emerging hierarchies of money, the gender of money, and money forms and generational conflict over digital monies. Theoretically, her inspiration comes not only from the institutional-substantivist economic anthropology tradition (Paul Bohannan, Sharon Hutchinson, Jane Guyer, Hart) but also the important work of sociologist Viviana Zelizer.

The chapter "Strategic Ignorance," which deals with how Kenyans blame technology ("because of the phone") when they are unable to meet obligations and expectations of kin and friends for digital money transfers and with the concept of "strategic ignorance" to explain not taking calls or switching off a mobile device, is stimulating and convincing. However, Kusimba is hesitant to include such practices of "seamfulness" (Vertesi 2014) as an example of Kenyans' "cultural wealth" or even as an instance of practical resistance or tactful incorporation. Kusimba's invocation of the term "revolution" in framing the social change she observes stands in contrast to her reluctance to view ordinary Kenyans as political actors. Her reframing of the established "wealth-in-people" concept into "rights-in-people" as the "main basis of prestige, power and access to resources" (51) should invite further scholarly engagement, especially in relation to the scholarship of Englund (2016). Hart always reminds us of the significance of asking who funded the French Revolution. Similarly, hopefully Kusimba's future work will dig deeper into the actors who fund and make this finance revolution, which hopefully would connect the story of the digital money revolution in Kenya to its funders in the USA and elsewhere.

The monograph's penultimate chapter, "Reimagining Giving: A Design Project," speaks to developments in the fintech scene and to anthropology's emergent engagement with design (in, for example, the work of Ingold 2013), consultancy research and a younger generation's renewed interest in a kind of rapprochement with the "development machine" as academic positions become scarcer, less attractive and more precarious. Here Kusimba recounts her involvement as a consultant with a fintech platform — supported by a prominent USA-based foundation — that sought to "scale up" existing social networks, cultural abilities and informal ties of fundraising to build a crowdfunding product "with an African twist" (150). Kusimba asks: Could the wealth-in-people theory of digital money design a product of financial inclusion? Could they address poverty by using "digital technology to amplify the size, speed, and economic value of social network money flows" (156)? Kusimba and her co-researchers were able to describe local cultures of giving, family money pooling, community self-help, and informal and group finance. Enter the design and business consulting teams, who worked from different theoretical and methodological starting points, including design principles and what is usually labelled "behavioural economics" (BE). Kusimba writes that while BE presents itself as a critique of the assumptions of rational self-interest by neoclassical economics, "it seeks to design convenience, affordability, and individual-device interactions that encourage inherently quirky and changeable humans to choose more efficient actions and temporalities such as savings, willpower, and self-control" (158). She also admits the difficulty understanding the BE view: "Is a rural woman … really in need of impulse control or more reminders? Can behavioural economics interventions that help people manage money on an app really impact the historical, embedded conditions of poverty?" (159). To the BE consultant, "nudges give people agency" and "poor people need design nudges even more, as they often fall victim to tunnelling, an excessive focus on certain unmet needs." Kusimba is rather kind when she writes that the "games methodology is a stark contrast to the ethnographic immersion of anthropology" (159–160). This chapter is arguable the one I enjoyed most, and the reasons for the ultimate failure of this collaboration and project in designing a commercial crowdfunding product built on informal social ties are well worth a read. It also points to a field of research and inquiry — an anthropology with technology designers and financial experts — where anthropologists are well placed to contribute.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2022.2125022