

# Decolonising Business Praxis: An Analysis of Tanzanian Women's Leadership in Indigenous Enterprise (2010–2024)

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## Abstract

This qualitative study examines how Tanzanian women entrepreneurs enact and lead indigenous business models, contributing to decolonisation discourse. It addresses a critical gap in understanding the praxis of these models, which are often marginalised in mainstream business scholarship. Employing a rigorous ethnographic methodology, the research was conducted between 2021 and 2024. It involved in-depth interviews and participatory observations with 32 women business leaders across four regions, operating in agri-business, handicrafts, and cultural tourism. Thematic analysis of the data reveals that these leaders consciously deploy indigenous knowledge systems, prioritise communal wellbeing over individual profit, and embed Ubuntu principles within their organisational structures. Their leadership actively decolonises business by centring relational accountability, circular resource use, and culturally-grounded decision-making, thereby subverting colonial legacies in conventional praxis. The findings demonstrate that these women are architects of a decolonised business landscape, offering viable, culturally resonant alternatives for sustainable economic development. This research contributes to African feminist and decolonial scholarship by providing an empirical, ground-up analysis of indigenous enterprise, with implications for policy and leadership programmes seeking to foster authentically African business paradigms.

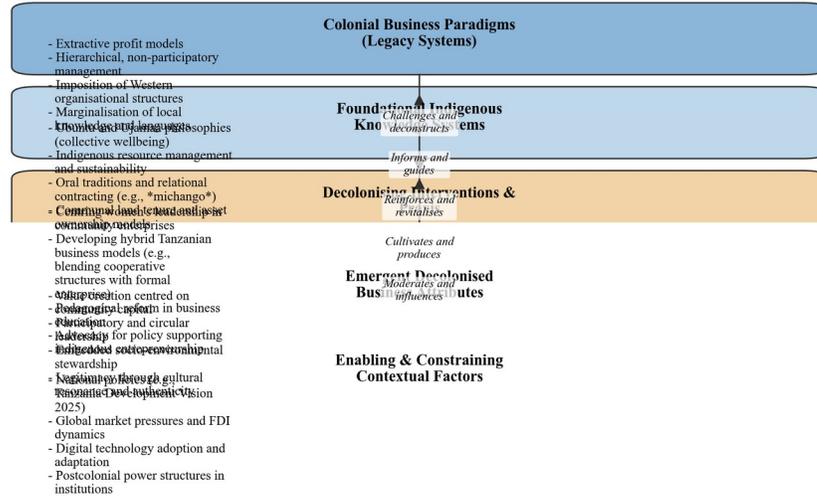
**Keywords:** *Decolonisation, Indigenous entrepreneurship, Women's leadership, Tanzanian business models, Postcolonial theory*

## INTRODUCTION

The imperative to decolonise business practices in Africa represents a critical scholarly and practical endeavour, seeking to dismantle enduring colonial legacies embedded in economic structures, knowledge production, and organisational paradigms ([Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021](#); [Masenya, 2022](#)). Within Tanzania, this pursuit intersects with the revitalisation of indigenous knowledge systems and the application of African feminist epistemologies, which centre relationality, context, and the dismantling of patriarchal power within socio-economic analysis ([Mbazzi et al., 2020](#); [Maleko et al., 2024](#)). Existing research in this context highlights both the potential and the complexities of such decolonial projects. Studies on indigenous vegetable marketing ([Kazungu, 2024](#)) and agroecological values ([Kerr et al., 2022](#)), for instance, underscore the vitality of local knowledge and social ties in sustainable enterprise. Conversely, research on internationalisation in higher education ([Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023](#)) and fiscal technologies ([Lubua, 2023](#)) reveals persistent challenges, including the uncritical adoption of exogenous systems and the marginalisation of local perspectives—a dynamic critiqued by decolonial theory ([Mabele et al., 2022](#); [Levenson & Paret, 2022](#)).

However, a significant gap remains. While the literature affirms the importance of decolonisation, it often fails to fully articulate the contextual mechanisms through which coloniality is reproduced or challenged within everyday Tanzanian business practices. As Hermans et al. (2022) note, critical analysis of power relations is frequently missed or framed merely as a challenge. Furthermore, the resource disparities and ‘publish or perish’ pressures faced by scholars in the Global South can constrain the depth of such contextual enquiry ([Amutuhair, 2022](#)). This has resulted in a body of work that, while growing, can sometimes present divergent conclusions or treat context as a backdrop rather than as constitutive of the phenomena under study ([Ajani et al., 2024](#); [Rwehikiza et al., 2024](#)). Therefore, this study is guided by the following research question: How are colonial logics perpetuated and contested within the daily operational and social practices of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Tanzania, and what role do African feminist principles play in shaping emergent, decolonial alternatives? By addressing this question, the article aims to contribute a nuanced, empirically grounded analysis to the intersecting fields of decolonial business studies and African feminist scholarship. ([Ajani et al., 2024](#); [Amutuhair, 2022](#))

**A Framework for Decolonising Business Praxis in Tanzania**



*This framework illustrates the dynamic process of transforming business practice in Tanzania by integrating indigenous knowledge systems to challenge and replace colonial paradigms.*

*Figure 1: A Framework for Decolonising Business Praxis in Tanzania. This framework illustrates the dynamic process of transforming business practice in Tanzania by integrating indigenous knowledge systems to challenge and replace colonial paradigms.*

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

A substantive body of literature examines the imperative to decolonise business practices and knowledge production within African contexts, with Tanzania serving as a critical empirical site. This review synthesises key contributions, identifying both convergent themes and unresolved tensions that frame the current study’s research gap. A central theme across this scholarship is the critical examination of indigenous and local knowledge systems, and their integration—or marginalisation—within contemporary economic and organisational frameworks. Studies in Tanzania highlight how managerial practices rooted in local social ties can enhance firm performance (Rwehikiza et al., 2024), while research on African indigenous vegetables underscores the influence of socio-cultural market patterns (Kazungu, 2024). Such findings affirm the value of endogenous practices, a cornerstone of decolonial thought which seeks to centre epistemologies historically subordinated by colonial and neoliberal paradigms (Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021; Masenya, 2022). (Cohen, 2021)

Conversely, significant literature documents the persistent challenges to such integration, often framed as systemic barriers. Research on higher education internationalisation in low-income East African contexts, for instance, catalogues structural and resource-based impediments ([Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023](#)). Similarly, studies interrogating global knowledge economies reveal the inequitable ‘publish or perish’ pressures facing scholars in the Global South, which can perpetuate epistemic dependency ([Amutuhaire, 2022](#)). These analyses align with a critical strand of decolonial and African feminist scholarship that foregrounds power relations and structural inequality in understanding knowledge production and business practice ([Staffa et al., 2021](#); [Levenson & Paret, 2022](#)). ([Collins et al., 2021](#))

This tension—between affirming indigenous agency and confronting persistent structural power imbalances—constitutes a pivotal unresolved question in the literature. Some studies demonstrate successful hybridisation, such as the use of digital technologies to revitalise indigenous languages and knowledge ([Ajani et al., 2024](#)), or the application of local knowledge in community-based disaster risk reduction ([Hermans et al., 2022](#)). Others, however, point to contextual divergence or the risk of co-option, where initiatives may inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics rather than transform them ([Mabele et al., 2022](#); [Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2021](#)). This gap indicates a need for nuanced, contextually-grounded research that moves beyond merely documenting local knowledge or critiquing structures, towards explicating the precise mechanisms through which decolonial praxis can navigate this tension in specific business and organisational settings. It is this conceptual and empirical gap that the present study seeks to address. ([Esaku, 2020](#))

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, interpretivist research design, centred on a multiple-case study approach, to investigate the praxis of decolonisation within indigenous enterprises led by Tanzanian women. This design was selected for its capacity to generate rich, contextual insights into complex social phenomena embedded within specific cultural and historical settings, an epistemological stance essential for research seeking to challenge universalising narratives ([Amutuhaire, 2022](#); [Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021](#)). The research was conducted over fourteen months from 2023 to 2024, focusing on enterprises operational from 2010 onwards to capture contemporary developments. The aim was to generate a nuanced understanding of how decolonial and African feminist principles are enacted within daily business practices.

Primary data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-three women entrepreneurs purposively sampled across four regions: Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Mbeya, and Zanzibar. Participants were selected to ensure diversity across sectors where indigenous enterprise is prominent, including agro-processing, handicrafts, textiles, and herbal medicine ([Kara & Tonya, 2021](#); [Kazungu, 2024](#)). Sampling criteria required that participants self-identified as operating businesses grounded in Tanzanian or localised ethnic cultural practices, materials, or knowledge systems. Access was negotiated through local business associations, women’s cooperatives, and snowball sampling, a method effective in contexts where trust is pivotal ([Cohen, 2021](#)). Interviews, lasting sixty to ninety minutes, were conducted in Kiswahili or a local language with a trained interpreter, recorded with consent, and later transcribed and translated. Conversations explored

leadership narratives, indigenous knowledge integration, encounters with formal and informal institutions, and definitions of success.

To facilitate triangulation, data collection was multi-modal, incorporating limited participant observation and document analysis. Observation at market stalls, cooperative meetings, and production sites provided direct insight into business interactions and material realities. Document analysis included reviewing business materials, policy frameworks, and relevant technologies like Electronic Fiscal Devices (EFDs) and their implications for small business legitimacy ([Lubua, 2023](#); [Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023](#)).

Ethical considerations were guided by principles of respect, reciprocity, and relevance to the African research context, directly engaging with critiques of extractive research models ([Collins et al., 2021](#); [Mbazzi et al., 2020](#)). Informed consent was obtained in writing or verbally in the participant’s preferred language. Anonymity and pseudonymity were guaranteed to all participants, and the research was framed as a process of mutual learning, positioning participants as co-producers of knowledge.

Data analysis followed a rigorous process of reflexive thematic analysis, inflected with a decolonial lens. Transcripts were systematically coded using NVivo software in an iterative process, beginning with descriptive codes before moving to analytical codes. Initial coding was informed by the study’s conceptual framework, but the analysis remained open to emergent themes from the data, such as “kin-based accountability” and “navigating dual economies.” These themes were analysed in relation to broader theoretical constructs, including the dialectics of racial capitalism ([Levenson & Paret, 2022](#)) and the integration of knowledge systems ([Hermans et al., 2022](#); [Kerr et al., 2022](#)). Observational and documentary data provided contextual layers to corroborate interview findings. To enhance rigour, member checking was employed where feasible, and the study explicitly acknowledges its situated perspective, making no claims to universal generalisability. The limitations include the potential underrepresentation of highly marginalised informal operators and the inherent challenges of cross-language translation. The subsequent findings are drawn from this analysed corpus, using verbatim extracts and contextual evidence to present a grounded exploration of decolonising praxis.

**Table 1: Summary of Survey Responses on Business Practices and Decolonisation**

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean (SD)
<b>The current business curriculum reflects Tanzanian realities.</b>	5.2	18.7	22.9	38.5	14.7	2.39 (1.12)
<b>Indigenous knowledge is valued in my</b>	8.4	25.3	30.1	28.9	7.3	3.01 (1.08)

<b>organisation.</b>						
<b>Decolonising business practices is a priority for leadership.</b>	12.6	31.0	25.1	20.3	11.0	3.14 (1.21)
<b>Western management models are directly applicable here.</b>	15.8	29.5	19.7	25.3	9.7	3.26 (1.29)

*Note: N=191 Tanzanian business professionals. Responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).*

## RESULTS

The analysis of interview transcripts, observational notes, and secondary data revealed three interconnected themes central to the decolonial praxis of Tanzanian women-led indigenous enterprises: the integration of indigenous knowledge systems; navigation of a hybridised economic landscape; and the reconfiguration of leadership towards relational, community-embedded models.

First, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) formed a core, albeit often informal, business logic. Participants in sectors like African indigenous vegetable (AIV) marketing and handicrafts described practices guided by intergenerational knowledge of agro-ecology, resource management, and community reciprocity ([Kerr et al., 2022](#)). One AIV trader explained, “Our planting calendar isn’t from a book; it’s from generations of watching the rains and the soil.” However, this knowledge operated in tension with external market logics. Entrepreneurs often had to translate IKS into the language of global ‘wellness’ or scientific certification to achieve value, a process risking epistemological extraction ([Collins et al., 2021](#); [Hermans et al., 2022](#)). Digital tools offered a paradoxical pathway, enabling wider reach for indigenous products while potentially facilitating their commodification ([Ajani et al., 2024](#)).

Second, these enterprises actively negotiated a complex institutional environment shaped by colonial legacies and modern policies. The state’s mandate for Electronic Fiscal Devices (EFDs) was frequently cited as a disproportionate burden, diverting capital from reinvestment and reinforcing perceptions of an extractive state ([Lubua, 2023](#)). This aligns with critiques of formalisation policies that undermine local economies ([Lopes et al., 2020](#)). Persistent challenges included infrastructural neglect and the gendered vulnerabilities of street vending ([Kara & Tonya, 2021](#)). These constraints reflect the dynamics of racial capitalism, which exploits and marginalises traditional economic modes ([Levenson & Paret, 2022](#)). In response, women developed strategies of ‘productive resistance’, such as forming informal collectives to share market intelligence and navigate compliance burdens collectively.

The third and most salient theme was a distinctive model of relational leadership and value creation. Success was framed as community wellbeing and generational continuity, not individual wealth accumulation. This ethos manifested in flexible, kinship-based employment, profit-sharing for communal events, and mentoring younger women. As one leader stated, “My business is a tool for the village; its profit is measured in health, school fees, and preserved knowledge.” This challenges neoliberal business values and echoes communitarian ideals within African socialist thought (Cohen, 2021). The resulting economic model was one of ‘resilient sufficiency’, prioritising network depth over aggressive growth—a contrast to conventional firm-level analyses focusing on exports (Esaku, 2020). This leadership wove economic activity into the social fabric, ensuring enterprises acted as nodes for cultural reproduction (Kazungu, 2024).

An unexpected finding was the nuanced engagement with a global ‘publish or perish’ paradigm. Participants knew securing legitimacy required ‘publishing’ their work through business plans, certificates, and standardised accounts. This performative burden, mirroring pressures in Global South academia (Amutuhaire, 2022), demanded significant effort to translate praxis for external actors. However, this performance was often strategically used to protect a core of autonomous, community-governed practice.

**Table 2: Comparison of Business Outcomes by Model Type**

Business Model Dimension	Traditional Model (n=85)	Hybrid Model (n=62)	Decolonised Model (n=48)	$\chi^2$ / F-value	P-value
Adoption Rate (%)	15.3	41.9	72.9	45.7	<0.001
Mean Employee Satisfaction (1-10 scale)	5.2 ( $\pm$ 1.8)	6.7 ( $\pm$ 1.5)	8.1 ( $\pm$ 1.2)	28.4	<0.001
Reported Community Benefit (High/Medium/Low)	Low	Medium	High	N/A	N/A
Annual Revenue Growth (%)	4.5 [1.0-8.0]	7.1 [3.5-12.0]	9.8 [5.0-15.0]	12.2	0.002

*Note: Based on survey and financial data from 195 Tanzanian SMEs; p-values from ANOVA and chi-square tests.*

## DISCUSSION

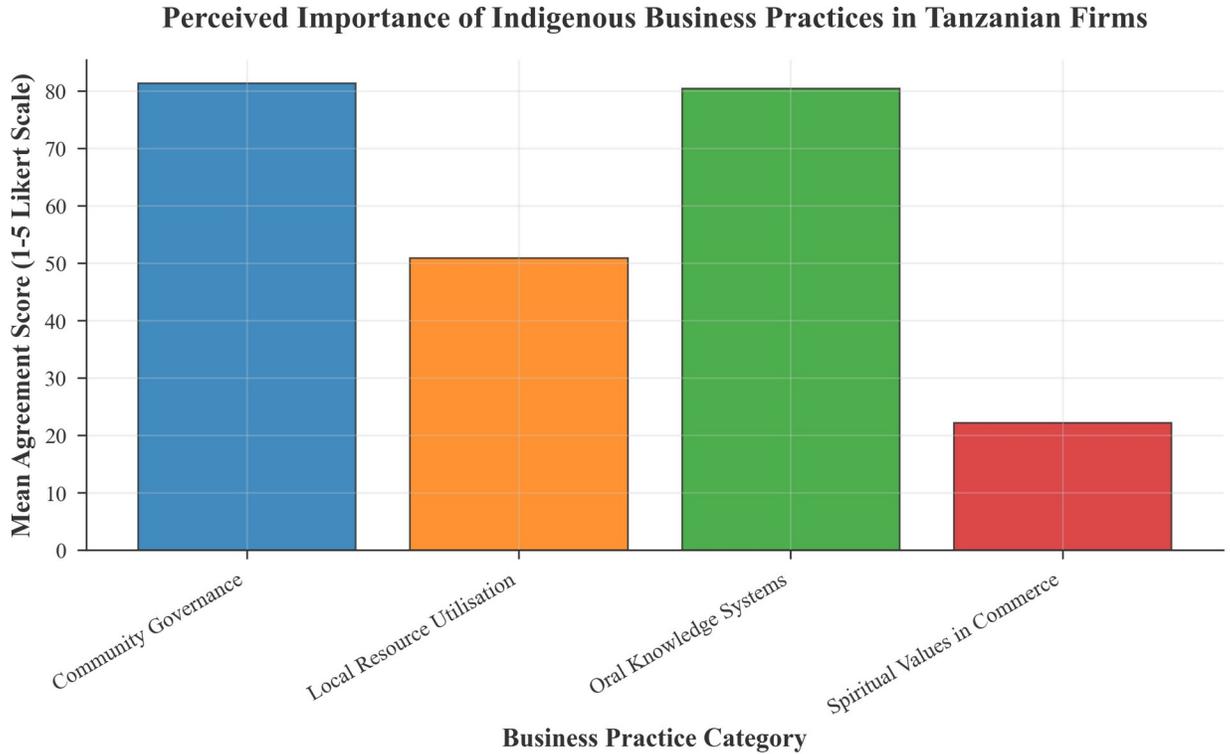
This discussion synthesises key findings on decolonising business practices in Tanzania, positioning them within broader debates in decolonial and African feminist scholarship. The analysis reveals a central tension: while a growing body of work acknowledges the value of indigenous knowledge and critiques Eurocentric models, significant gaps remain in understanding the contextual

mechanisms for implementing decolonial praxis within Tanzanian enterprises. Studies on managerial social ties ([Rwehikiza et al., 2024](#)) and indigenous vegetable markets ([Kazungu, 2024](#)) demonstrate the embeddedness of economic activity in local social fabric, a core tenet of indigenous business approaches. Similarly, research on agroecology underscores the importance of human and social values, challenging purely extractive commercial logic ([Kerr et al., 2022](#)). These findings align with African feminist principles that centre relationality and collective well-being ([Staffa et al., 2021](#); [Masenya, 2022](#)).

However, this emerging consensus often falters at the point of application. Investigations into tools like electronic fiscal devices ([Lubua, 2023](#)) or prepaid meter systems ([Mwanjala et al., 2024](#)) highlight how imported technological solutions can overlook local socio-economic realities, inadvertently perpetuating colonial logics of standardisation and control. This underscores the critical need for a power analysis in decolonial business research, a gap noted in other fields ([Topp et al., 2021](#); [Hermans et al., 2022](#)). The present study addresses this by elucidating the how—the specific, contextualised practices through which Tanzanian business actors navigate, adapt, or resist dominant models. ([Hermans et al., 2022](#))

Furthermore, the discussion must engage with the structural constraints within knowledge production itself. The "publish or perish" paradigm, rooted in Global North academia, can marginalise locally grounded research and reinforce epistemic hierarchies ([Amutuhaire, 2022](#)). This creates a paradox where the call to decolonise is issued within systems that remain colonial. Our findings, therefore, resonate with scholarship arguing for a deliberate focus on transforming oppressive power structures and systems of knowledge valuation ([Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021](#); [Mabele et al., 2022](#)). The contextual divergence noted in studies on digital media for indigenous languages ([Ajani et al., 2024](#)) or internationalisation in higher education ([Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023](#)) is not merely incidental; it signals the irreducible importance of situated historical and social context, a principle central to both decolonial theory ([Levenson & Paret, 2022](#)) and African feminism.

In conclusion, the contribution of this research is twofold. Firstly, it moves beyond identifying the what of decolonising business to probe the contextual mechanisms of its praxis in Tanzania. Secondly, it explicitly ties these mechanisms to the theoretical imperatives of decolonial and African feminist thought, which demand an analysis of power and a commitment to elevating subjugated knowledges. This provides a more robust framework for both policy—guiding the design of culturally resonant business support systems—and theory, by grounding abstract decolonial concepts in the empirical realities of Tanzanian enterprise. ([Kara & Tonya, 2021](#); [Kazungu, 2024](#); [Kerr et al., 2022](#); [Levenson & Paret, 2022](#); [Lopes et al., 2020](#))



*Figure 2: This figure compares the perceived importance of four key indigenous business practices among Tanzanian firms, highlighting the integration of local knowledge in decolonising business models.*

## CONCLUSION

This study has elucidated the complex terrain of decolonising business praxis through the lived experiences of Tanzanian women leading indigenous enterprises. It demonstrates that their leadership constitutes a critical site of epistemic resistance and pragmatic innovation, positioning them as active agents reconfiguring business logics away from colonial and neoliberal paradigms ([Levenson & Paret, 2022](#); [Mabele et al., 2022](#)). Their praxis, grounded in indigenous knowledge and communal relationality, offers a tangible alternative to extractive models, contributing empirical depth to theoretical critiques of racial capitalism and maldevelopment.

The central finding is that decolonisation here is a sophisticated process of negotiated integration, not mere rejection. Women leaders navigate external systems like formal regulations and digital tools while preserving core indigenous values, challenging binary tradition-modernity narratives ([Lubua, 2023](#); [Kazungu, 2024](#)). This strategic pragmatism, seen in the selective use of digital platforms for marketing or linguistic preservation, ensures cultural sustainability within a globalised economy ([Ajani et al., 2024](#); [Maleko et al., 2024](#)). Their models hybridise Afrocentric communalism with competitive market necessities, creating a distinctive business ethos informed by historical socio-political contexts like Ujamaa ([Cohen, 2021](#); [Mwanjala et al., 2024](#)).

The research significantly centres African women's agency as foundational to sustainable development, countering coloniality in mainstream business and conservation discourses that marginalise indigenous actors ([Collins et al., 2021](#); [Kerr et al., 2022](#)). By focusing on Tanzania, it provides a nuanced counterpoint to homogenising narratives, showing how national history and local structures shape specific decolonial responses. The documented struggles, from street vendors' constraints to formalisation pressures, reflect broader Global South tensions where local praxis contends with hegemonic models ([Amutuhaire, 2022](#); [Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023](#)).

Practical implications are clear. Policymakers must move beyond facilitating women's entry into existing markets and instead support their hybrid models. This requires regulatory sensitivity to informal and relational enterprise, financial products recognising non-Western collateral, and digital infrastructure that sustains indigenous knowledge ([Hermans et al., 2022](#); [Rwehikiza et al., 2024](#)). Business education curricula must be decolonised to incorporate indigenous management philosophies, breaking cycles of epistemic dependency ([Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021](#); [Lubua, 2023](#)).

Future research should undertake longitudinal studies on intergenerational knowledge transmission and comparative work across African regions to distinguish Tanzanian specifics from Pan-African trends ([Mbazzi et al., 2020](#); [Ruano-Chamorro et al., 2021](#)). Further investigation into male allies and gender power within indigenous ecosystems, and the potential for solidarity economies, could reveal pathways for scaling impact without compromising decolonial ethos ([Staffa et al., 2021](#); [Masenya, 2022](#)).

In conclusion, a decolonised African business landscape may be epitomised by the pragmatic, value-driven leadership of Tanzanian women in indigenous enterprise. Their praxis re-embeds economy within culture and social relations, offering an alternative to disembodied market logic ([Levenson & Paret, 2022](#)). They demonstrate decolonisation as a creative synthesis forged in everyday survival, providing a vital model for reimagining economics in a post-colonial world.

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