The Dot Com Zambia Story

The Journey Behind the Brand

The Personal Story of Mawano Kambeu and Dot Com Zambia's 19-Year Rise and Road to the Lusaka Securities Exchange

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Preface

“Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world.”
Joel A. Barker

Every company’s story begins with its founders. Likewise, the story about the historic journey of one of Zambia’s most highly anticipated IPOs begins with this brief biographical account of Dot Com Zambia’s founder, Mawano Kambeu.

The tale follows Mawano’s extraordinary 19-year journey across two continents. It takes us to where we are today, marking a first for the Lusaka Securities Exchange’s Alternative Market (Alt-M). This is the first time a locally founded SME, built entirely from scratch by a Zambian entrepreneur, has grown to the scale and maturity required to go public.

Nearly two decades of personal and corporate history are included in this brief biographical sketch you hold in your hands. Obviously, these few pages cannot provide a complete retelling of the events that have led to this historic moment. But as good stories do, this account provides the backstory of the protagonist.

The hero’s journey is a template for stories in which an individual sets out on a quest. It is not heroic because of glory or triumph, but because it demands something difficult of the person who walks it — courage, sacrifice, resilience, faith — and leaves them changed on the other side. Mawano’s story follows this pattern. However, his backstory isn’t fictional; it’s an account of the journey that led to the formation of Dot Com Zambia, making it even more inspirational.

The story you are about to read is of lessons learned through hardship and the flexibility to see setbacks as setups for something greater. This biography provides background material for the IPO. However, it’s also an invitation to investors, journalists, and the public to explore the story behind the brand and embrace the belief that local entrepreneurship, when nurtured and supported, can transform a nation.

CHAPTER 1 – THE EARLY YEARS

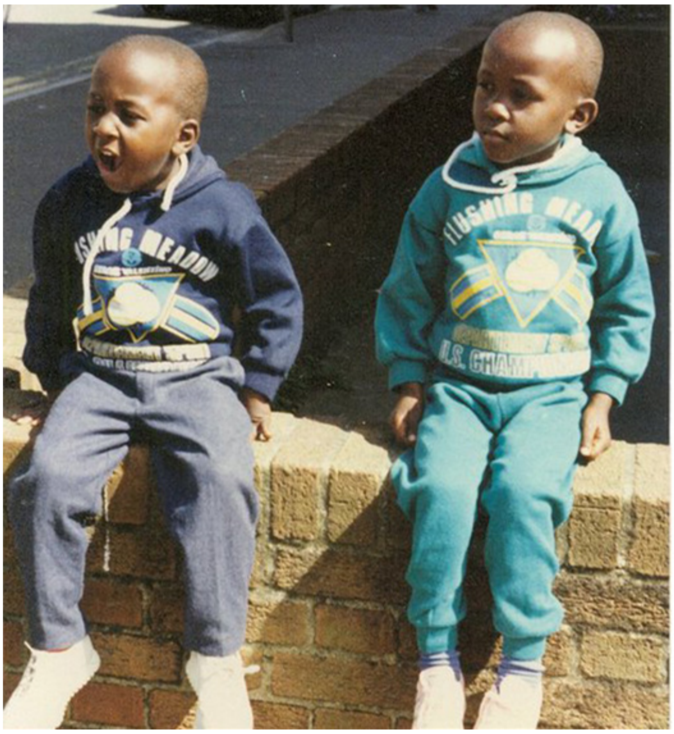
"All grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it."

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Mawano Kambeu was born in Kitwe, Zambia, in 1982. He is the firstborn child of three. His mother, Grace Kambeu, was a teacher, and his father, Kennedy Kambeu, was a lifelong civil servant in the Forestry Department. Like many civil servants of that era, Mawano's father earned a government scholarship to study abroad, so when Mawano was five years old, his family moved to Cardiff, Wales. There, both his parents pursued further education, his father in zoology, and his mother in education.

In the early 1990s, Mawano's family returned to Zambia and settled between Kitwe and Solwezi following his father's forestry postings. In Kitwe, they lived in Mwekera, near the Zambia Forestry College, a quiet, semi-rural area where the homes are scattered among trees and open space, surrounded by nature and the bush.

Most of Mawano's formative years unfolded in the 1990s, which was a defining decade for Zambia and its youth culture. This was the era before DSTV and other satellite television providers became common in most Zambian homes. It was a time when Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC) was the country's only television channel. Afternoons meant rushing home to catch cartoons on ZNBC at 16:45, closing with the national anthem and epilogue at midnight. Evenings might include *Hammer House of Horror*, *The Beam* music show, and, years later, episodes of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* or the Mexican Telenovela *No One But You*. It was a time when the entire country would stay up all night waiting for a Mike Tyson fight that usually ended in less than two minutes. And as part of the build-up, ZNBC always aired a movie called *Arachnophobia* about a killer spider.



1988 – Cardiff, Wales, UK
Mawano Kambeu (right) with his younger brother (left), photographed during their childhood years in the United Kingdom.

For Mawano, daily life in Mwekera on weekends and school holidays was simple and structured. He and his friends played football barefoot with a chipombwa (a football made of plastic bags and rope) until it was time to bathe and have "16-hours tea," followed later by dinner, always as a family around the table. Like most homes in that era, the Kambeu household was a modest three-bedroom, one-bathroom house that was constantly filled with visiting relatives and extended family. Space was always tight. As he and his brother grew older, the two perfected the familiar 'head-to-feet' sleeping arrangement that many Zambian children know well. Christmas in particular stands out in his memory. The holiday meant a special meal of chicken, rice, and a bottle of Fanta. It was a simple tradition, but one filled with anticipation and joy, and it became one of the defining rituals of his childhood.

A DECADE OF CHANGE

The 1990s were also a time of profound social and economic change in Zambia. The return to multi-party politics in 1991 brought the MMD to power and ushered in a period of reform, privatization, and economic uncertainty. Mawano remembers the currency fluctuations, the hardships that followed the sale of state-owned companies, and the first visible signs of rising unemployment. It was also the height of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, a time marked by public-health campaigns, school slogans like " *Abstinence Iliche* (Abstinence is cool)," and magazines such as *Trendsetters* that defined youth awareness.

Culturally, music and television were a window to the world. Having a VHS cassette loaded with BET music videos or an imported rap tape made one instantly popular, the ultimate status symbol for teenagers of that era.

1997 – Lechwe School, Kitwe
Mawano Kambeu (left) with his sister (centre) and younger brother (right). Photograph from their school years in Kitwe, Zambia.

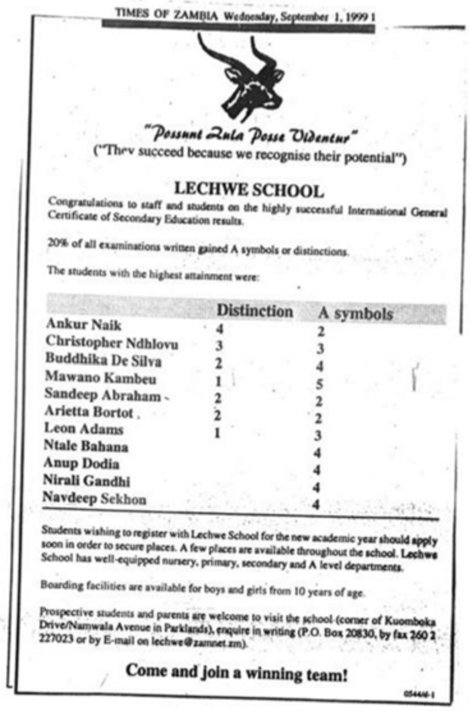
FINDING IDENTITY

Soon after the family's return from the UK, Mawano's mother began teaching at Lechwe School, which allowed him and his siblings to study there. He was academically strong across subjects, especially the humanities, but socially awkward and a little nerdy with his oversized glasses and a heavy lisp (which he later learned to manage through self-taught speech therapy techniques). He often felt out of place among wealthier classmates who called him 'Professsssssor,' stretching out the name to tease his lisp, but also acknowledging his visible intellect.

Those years created their own challenges to Mawano's self-esteem, but they also taught him adaptability, resilience, and helped him build confidence so that he excelled through merit rather than privilege. More importantly, his various struggles taught him to be content with who he was, to find happiness in what he had, and to gain the self-confidence needed to resist peer pressure. The lessons of those years would shape almost every major decision that followed, from choosing to return to Zambia when others stayed abroad, to building a company from scratch, and eventually to taking Dot Com Zambia public. Mawano has never followed the crowd, and that independence has defined his entire journey.

Mawano often says of his childhood that growing up with a younger brother and sister was a happy time that offered *"the best of all worlds"*: the adventure of Zambian rural life mixed with urban privileged schooling and early exposure to the world beyond Zambia.

By the end of the 1990s, the whole world was changing. The internet was just emerging, and satellite television in Zambia was transforming the way people saw the world. For Zambia's youth, this was a period of transition as technology was starting to take over. Mawano watched the world shift from a time when research meant hours in a library, to one where information travelled at the speed of light into a computer screen. It was a time of change, curiosity, and awakening and he was growing up right in the middle of it.



TIMES OF ZAMBIA Wednesday, September 1, 1999 I

"Possunt Quia Posse Videntur"
("Thev succeed because we recognise their potential")

LECHWE SCHOOL

Congratulations to staff and students on the highly successful International General Certificate of Secondary Education results.

20% of all examinations written gained A symbols or distinctions.

The students with the highest attainment were:

	Distinction	A symbols
Ankur Naik	4	2
Christopher Ndhlovu	3	3
Buddhika De Silva	2	4
Mawano Kambeu	1	5
Sandeep Abraham	2	2
Arietta Bortot	2	2
Leon Adams	1	3
Ntale Bahana		4
Anup Dodia		4
Nirali Gandhi		4
Navdeep Sekhon		4

Students wishing to register with Lechwe School for the new academic year should apply soon in order to secure places. A few places are available throughout the school. Lechwe School has well-equipped nursery, primary, secondary and A level departments.

Boarding facilities are available for boys and girls from 10 years of age.

Prospective students and parents are welcome to visit the school (corner of Kuomboka Drive/Namwala Avenue in Parklands), enquire in writing (P.O. Box 20830, by fax 260 2 227023 or by E-mail on lechwe@zamnet.zm).

Come and join a winning team!

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1999 – Times of Zambia
Newspaper clipping listing Lechwe School's top IGCSE students, featuring Mawano among the highest achievers.

Kitwe teenager raises K2.5m for kids centre

By ZILOSE PHIRI

AT a distance, Mawano Kambeu looks like an average teenager.

But the 18-year-old Kambeu, an A-Level student at Lechwe School, has gained praise and recognition for his incredible success at raising money for a street kids project in the impoverished Musonda compound in Kitwe.

Kambeu revived his School's Community Service Club last year by single-handedly raising K2.5 million that kick-started an ambitious programme to build a centre for the under-privileged children.

In December, he went round Kitwe's business community and involved them in the project by asking them to donate prizes for a Christmas raffle that brought in the K2.5 million turnover.

The community club is now working at acquiring a piece of land in Musonda Compound near Riverside at a cost of K5 million.

Unfortunately, the piece of land has a dilapidated building that needs to be renovated to turn it into a habitable place for the children.

Initially, members of the club would meet with kids at a council building, but the Kitwe City Council has repossessed it for other purposes.

"We'd go out and teach the kids some basics such as the alphabet, arithmetic and English. The school (Lechwe) provides chalk, boards and reading material.

"But we wanted to take a more independent approach, so I came up with the Lechwe Community Fund in October. Now we are organising a theatrical and fashion show to help us raise money to buy the plot," Kambeu said in an interview.

The show has been set for the end of this month and Kambeu will play the part of a character called "Mickey" in a production called **Blood Brothers**.

"Our motivation is drawn from the bond we've formed with the children," Kambeu said when asked what prompted him and his friends to help the under-privilleged children.

Then he added: "I did not know what to expect when I started this work. I know there is poverty in Zambia but I had never seen nor experienced it first hand.

"Although the government tries hard, unimaginable poverty still persists among many [illegible]

One of his teachers, Mrs Deborah Bwalya is impressed with Mawano's contribution to the club.

"He has rejuvenated our club and founded a fund with ambitious aims. He has creative ideas, but, more importantly, he is able to implement them extremely efficiently," Mrs Bwalya said.

She also stressed that he had definite leadership qualities and seemed to inspire his peers.

"Whether addressing a school assembly or adult function, or teaching a group of orphans, he has excellent public speaking skills.

"He has worked methodically on fundraising projects, he already has competence in marketing and business management," Mrs Bwalya added.

KAMBEU.

It is little wonder then that Mawano is the head boy at Lechwe School.

In a testimony of his responsible nature, during the school recess in July and August last year, Mawano worked at National Milling Company in the production department and later moved to the marketing department.

In recognition of his academic credentials as well as his contribution to community life, he has been awarded the Loret Ruppe International Student Scholarship to study a discipline of his choice at the Wartburg College in Iowa, United States.

The scholarship programme honours the late Loret Miller Ruppe, former director of the volunteer agency Peace Corps and U.S. Ambassador to Norway.

Appointed by former president Ronald Reagan in 1981, Ruppe headed the Peace Corps for eight years, the longest tenure of any director in its 37-year history.

When she took over, the volunteer force had shrunk from 15,000 in 1966 to about 5,000 and budget cuts threatened the organisation's existence.

Under her direction, the budget allocation increased consistently and the number of volunteers grew by 20 per cent.

When Ruppe went on American national television in 1985 to announce that 600 volunteers were needed for famine relief work in Africa, more than 7,000 people contacted the agency.

Loret Ruppe died of cancer in 1996, at the age of 60.

Mawano has now started asking questions on why people who live in poverty live the way they do; why nothing seems to be happening to improve their welfare; why poverty is not as bad a problem in some countries as it is in others.

These are the questions that he says have inspired him to examine and study economics-related courses at Wartburg College in August when his programme begins.

Apart from community work, he has been an active member of the Scripture Union where he held the position of publicity officer, was the school's chess champion and captained the soccer team until his eyes started failing him.

When asked to talk about his family background, he shyly explains that he is the oldest of the three children.

His siblings, a brother Mwengo (17) and Sashi (12) are both at the International School of Lusaka.

His mother is a teacher at the same school while his father works with the Forestry Department.

His message to fellow youths is that they should have a vision to strive for. They should put faith in the Lord and in hard work. They should involve themselves in productive things and ~~aim to~~ achieve their dreams.

When asked about his ambitions for the future, he says that he hopes to work for either the government or United Nations agencies that deal with helping people.

And unlike his peers who spot earings on one ear and wear over-sized jeans and baseball shirts in line with 21st century fashion trends that mimic the R&B musicians of America, Mawano has remained unperturbed by such inclinations.

He has remained level-headed and sincere.

Zambia Daily Mail
Jan 24, 2001

2001 – Zambia Daily Mail (Community work)
Article highlighting Mawano Kambeu's fundraising and leadership efforts at Lechwe School, raising K2.5 million to support a children's community centre.

DOTCOM ZAMBIA

CHAPTER 2 – THE AMERICA YEARS

"I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, I found the streets weren't paved at all and that I was expected to pave them."

Unknown Author Describing the Immigrant Experience

When Mawano learnt he would be going to the United States in 2002 at age of 19, it felt to him like the greatest and most exciting thing that could happen. In the 1990s, America was the dream: the land of Hollywood, R&B, MTV, and boundless opportunity. Everyone in Zambia had heard the same stories: that in America, even being a janitor and cleaning floors could make you a millionaire. It was exaggerated, of course, but the idea was simple: America was the Land of Milk and Honey, where even small jobs could lead to big success. Looking back, Mawano says he went to America "based on a lie," not one of intended deceit, but rather out of a belief and shared illusion that the American dream came easily.

The reality was far less forgiving. His parents put up their entire life savings to have enough for just one academic term, expecting Mawano would find his footing from there. When the money ran out after that one term, so did school. For the next two years, he lived with a cousin in a small apartment outside of New York. The neighbourhood was tough, but the presence of family made all the difference. Having a familiar face and a place to sleep offered a measure of comfort and protection during a chapter defined by uncertainty and survival. It also spared him the burden of searching for accommodation he could not afford, giving him a foundation from which to regroup and find his way forward.

To raise money for school, Mawano worked every odd job imaginable. He unloaded trucks at UPS, cleaned offices after hours, worked warehouse shifts and did janitorial work. Like many new immigrants struggling to make ends meet, Mawano had to resist the advances of unsavoury characters who preyed on newcomers, people offering quick money or shady schemes that promised easy success. Mawano learned this lesson the hard way, while in school and unable to afford textbooks. An apparent benefactor stepped in and paid he $500 he needed.

Mawano naively thought the man was just being kind to a talented 'kid' until he learned the true cost of that gesture and what was demanded in return. Those early days were marked by a deep homesickness that settled quickly and heavily. He remembers one night in particular, after three continuous days of working sixteen-hour shifts at a factory. Technically, the extra hours were "voluntary," but as he puts it, *"The supervisor made it very clear that if you didn't volunteer, you wouldn't be coming back."* By that third day, his body was drained, aching from head to toe. During a short break, he locked himself in a toilet stall and cried quietly, wishing he could go back home. But pride kept him from leaving or even admitting out loud to having such thoughts. No one wanted to return to Zambia as a failure, with nothing to show for it.

But even in that difficult early stretch, the tide began to shift in the most ordinary of ways. A misplaced phone call at a temporary work agency where he was listed became a turning point. The usual gentleman who handled immigrant placements was not in the office that day, and a different lady answered instead. Maybe it was his well-spoken manner on the phone that made an impression. Whatever the reason, the lady sent him to fill in as a receptionist for a few days, then on to a small law firm for what was meant to be a two-week posting while they searched for a paralegal. He stayed five months, becoming a capable paralegal and earning a glowing recommendation. From there, the agency sent him to the mailroom of a financial services company for a six-month assignment. He never left. He moved from the mailroom into customer service, then operations, and eventually onto the firm's Wall Street investment sales desk.

In 2008–2009, against all odds, his sales target was US $14 million, the lowest in the company, but he delivered US $30 million in investment sales and earned US $180,000 that year, mostly in commissions.

For a 26-year-old African immigrant who had arrived in America with nothing and was still without a university degree, it was roughly six times what he had earned in his previous roles in customer service and operations.

Despite his remarkable success, he describes sales as the toughest and most demanding job had ever had. Being constantly on call, staying energised for clients, and attending endless events was emotionally exhausting for a young man who considered himself a natural introvert. Even today, he still prefers quiet and the comfort of home, and even today admits that being in the spotlight does not come easily. Yet he calls that period the most valuable entrepreneurship training he has ever received. It taught him discipline under pressure and, most importantly, how to sell, a skill every business needs to survive and grow.

Within a year of working in sales, another opportunity opened up within the firm's Investment and Asset Management Department: a managerial role overseeing Investment Sales and Marketing, with a fixed annual salary of US $80,000. It was technically a step up and offered stability for predictable income, but for Mawano, the real appeal was different. The sales environment, though lucrative, was emotionally draining and burned out many people quickly. When the chance came to move into a role that provided both responsibility and breathing room, he gladly walked away from the so-called 'big money.'

All these things were happening simultaneously: his career growth, his education, and the early foundations of what would later become Dot Com Zambia. From that point onward, his days followed an almost impossible rhythm. He worked from dawn until 17hrs, then hurried to evening classes that ran until 22hrs, including Saturdays. Nights stretched into the early hours as he balanced school work with running a growing business that already had paying customers. In the United States, he was effectively a one-man operation, handling everything from customer service and order fulfilment to coordination with his single counterpart in Zambia. Sleep rarely lasted more than three hours, five if he was lucky, and the schedule was especially brutal in the American winters, when long commutes and freezing temperatures made every day feel harder. It was a relentless routine that demanded complete discipline and laid the foundation for entrepreneurial endurance that would define his later success.

2012 – Mawano at Time Square in New York City

Overlaying all of this were the unmistakable racial overtones of American life. Quiet biases lingered in everyday interactions. Later, in corporate settings, he often found himself the only Black person in the room. He carried the pressure to perform, to belong, and to represent - all at the same time.

Eventually, the strain of that relentless pace caught up with him. His mornings became a constant battle. Waking up and getting ready for work felt like climbing a mountain. He began showing up late to work almost every day, unable to explain the reason for his tardiness. Mawano couldn't answer because he didn't understand what was happening to him at the time. As bad as his workdays were, weekends were worse. He stayed in bed from Friday night through Monday morning, lights off, leaving only to use the bathroom or grab whatever snacks were within reach. In this grey and dreary world he found himself in, Mawano scolded and chastised himself for being weak. He felt he needed to toughen up and push through. Fortunately, a friend recognised the symptoms and intervened. With the friend's help, he entered treatment and spent the next two years rebuilding balance and perspective.

"SO IF JASON RANDEE, WHO OWNED THE BLOCKBUSTER VIDEO FRANCHISES IN LUSAKA, EVER CLAIMS HE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR DOT COM ZAMBIA STARTING, I CAN'T EXACTLY ARGUE WITH HIM."

THE ORIGINS OF DOT COM ZAMBIA

By 2006, four years after arriving in America, Mawano had finally saved enough to make his first trip home. The visit stirred something deeper than nostalgia. It sharpened his desire to return to Zambia permanently and reminded him that his future was there, not abroad.

That trip also planted the earliest seeds of what would become Dot Com Zambia. Although the company would not be formally registered until 2009, its true beginnings trace back to that year. It started almost by accident. Someone was looking for a reliable person to fulfill an online order, and that someone turned out to be Blockbuster Video in Lusaka. The order was worth US $4,000, a staggering amount for a student who had spent nearly everything on his holiday.

"I had no money," he recalls. *"But somehow I convinced them to pay me upfront."* He pauses and smiles, *"So if Jason Randee, who owned the Blockbuster Video franchises in Lusaka, ever claims he was responsible for Dot Com Zambia starting, I can't exactly argue with him."*

That single order opened a door he did not even know existed. To fulfill it, he had to learn how to source and buy goods online, find effective shipping routes to Zambia, and navigate the customs clearing process, effectively creating an informal shipping lane made up of couriers and clearing agents. Soon, Jason began asking him to order personal items from Amazon and eBay, such as a laptop for his child's birthday or small electronics for the stores, things he could not find locally. Word spread quickly, and others back home began making similar requests.

A pattern was forming. People in Zambia wanted access to global online shopping, but most at the time did not have internationally enabled bank cards or access to payment options like PayPal.

DESPITE LUCRATIVE OFFERS TO STAY IN THE U.S., INCLUDING ONE WORTH US $250,000 A YEAR TO GO BACK TO WALL STREET SALES, HIS MIND WAS MADE UP

He became that bridge. What began as a practical solution for one business and its network grew steadily, one online order at a time. By 2012 it had become a business generating over a million dollars in annual revenue. But that would prove to be its high-water mark, as the landscape in Zambia and the dynamics of that business began to shift.

By 2013, he had completed his undergraduate degree and an MBA in Finance. Despite lucrative offers to stay in the U.S., including one worth US $250,000 a year to go back to Wall Street sales, his mind was made up. America had given him knowledge, but not belonging. Every plan now centred on returning to Zambia.

2009 – Early Dot Com Zambia Flyer
One of the company's first promotional materials explaining how customers could shop online from the United States and have items shipped to Zambia.

He calls those years *"the University of Survival"* — a decade of truth, exhaustion, and discovery.

CHAPTER 3 – HOMEWARD BOUND

"I'm convinced that about half of what separates successful entrepreneurs from the non-successful ones is pure perseverance."

Steve Jobs

When Mawano Kambeu finally returned home to Zambia, it was not a spontaneous leap of faith: it was a move years in the making. He had planned and prepared for it carefully, saving enough to live for several years without a salary if needed. The company he had been quietly building from abroad showed clear promise. During his frequent visits back home, he saw growing business opportunities and realized that technology and e-commerce could be used to solve real problems in Zambia. Even so, the business had never paid him a single kwacha. Although Dot Com Zambia had been operating since 2006, he would not draw a formal salary until 2017.

He returned determined but also pragmatic. In the first few months, he explored the idea of taking a job while continuing to grow his business. What he encountered was a shock to his system. In America, potential employers waved fistfuls of dollars to entice him to come to work for them. But in his homeland, he had, in effect, become unemployable. Every interview seemed to carry the same undertone: scepticism, resentment, or defensiveness. *"It was always that look,"* he recalls, *"the look that said, 'Oh, you think you're better than us because you worked in America and got some fancy degree.'"* It was a strange and surprising reversal from the Zambia he had known in the 1990s, when a foreign degree almost guaranteed opportunity. This was a different Zambia.

Realising he would have to create his own path, he turned fully to Dot Com Zambia. He knew the company needed far more capital than any bank would offer. So began what he calls the "long investor roadshow" — two years and more than a hundred pitches. Some meetings were in person, others over email or Skype, and most ended the same way: with polite rejections.

During that period, he immersed himself in Zambia's small but emerging start-up scene. At a BongoHive entrepreneurship event in 2013, he met Mr Chabala Kaunda, a seasoned businessman with deep networks. It was the beginning of a mentorship he would increasingly rely on for guidance.

Mawano recalls one act that captured that spirit of that mentorship.

One morning, Mr Kaunda picked him up before dawn and drove more than 320 kilometres to Ndola for a meeting with the Zampost CEO. The meeting lasted about an hour. They then turned around and drove straight back to Lusaka. No business opportunity materialised from that meeting. Mr Kaunda never asked for fuel money and never hinted at wanting anything in return.

That kind of selflessness left a lasting impression. In appreciation for his guidance and recognising how much he depended on it during those early years, Mawano later appointed him as an advisor to the company. Their relationship continued through Dot Com Zambia's evolution, and today Mr. Kaunda serves as Chairman of the Board.

The following year, in 2014, at an entrepreneurship dinner hosted by the Swedish Ambassador to Zambia, he met Hon. Vincent Mwale, then Minister of Youth and Sport, and Jito Kayumba, a venture capitalist. Those introductions would later prove pivotal, with both men offering support, opening doors, and helping to shape the direction of Dot Com Zambia's next chapter.

Mawano Kambeu and Chabala Kaunda
2014

Eventually, over the long search for funding, only two parties showed genuine interest — eVentures Africa Fund, a Dutch-based technology venture-capital firm founded by Vincent Kouwenhoven, and Kukula Capital, a Zambian investment firm in which Tue Andersen and Jito Kayumba were partners. Out of more than a hundred pitches, these were the only two that stayed at the table, even though both remained openly sceptical. Their caution was understandable. eVentures understood technology but had never invested in Zambia. Kukula, on the other hand, understood the Zambian business environment but had never invested in a technology company. Still, Mawano kept the conversations going, even flying to Amsterdam three times to meet with Vincent and the eVentures Africa team. Ironically, it was he who would later introduce Tue and Vincent to each other, and through their own discussions, they began exploring a joint investment, becoming board members in the process.

That unlikely partnership, which brought together two very different worlds and perspectives, marked the beginning of Dot Com Zambia's first board, joined by Mr Chabala Kaunda, and laid the foundation for what the company would become.

September 2015 – Celebration of Investment
Vincent Kouwenhoven (left), Mawano Kambeu (centre), and Hon. Vincent Mwale (right) celebrate the investment in Dot Com Zambia

From the Zambian diaspora

He sought greener pastures,
found them,
then came back

March 2012 – Nkhani Culture Magazine
Feature article about Mawano Kambeu's entrepreneurial journey, photographed in New York City by Greg Wood.

CHAPTER 4 – THROUGH THE FIRE

"You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it."

Margaret Thatcher

September 2015 – Investment Agreement Signing
Mawano Kambeu (left), Jito Kayumba (centre), and Vincent Kouwenhoven (right) signing a US $500,000 investment agreement in Lusaka.

The US $500,000 investment marked a turning point for Dot Com Zambia, but it also delivered a hard lesson about the perils of rapid growth. After years of pitching and rejection, the capital felt like a breakthrough, yet it quickly became clear that money alone does not guarantee success. The burn rate accelerated sharply as the kwacha weakened from five to the dollar, costs rose overnight, and investor pressure mounted to hire aggressively and expand fast. *"We ended up with expensive hires, some with advanced degrees, who looked great on paper but added no value,"* he recalls. *"It was an expensive education."*

By 2016, the fortunes of the original e-commerce business had already begun to decline. One of the company's first major technology ventures, a bus-ticketing system, had a solid business plan and earned the company several accolades. But despite the recognition and clear value proposition to consumers, it failed to gain traction, something he now says *"will make a very good MBA case study one day."* Even as the overall business itself looked as if it was on the verge of collapse, Mawano refused to quit. Salaries were paid from his personal savings until there was nothing left. The assets he had built during his years in America: properties, reserves, his $401K pension, everything meant to give him stability — were lost, and others were in the process of being repossessed because of defaults on personal loans he had taken out to keep the business afloat.

"In 2017, I went from managing a funded start-up to not being able to pay rent," he says. Facing loan defaults and court proceedings, he began subletting a room in his rented Olympia apartment on Airbnb, renting it to tourists just to survive. *"It reached a point where I thought I would have to move back to my parents' house. This was devastating for me, not because I didn't love them, I did, but because the appearance or truth of failure would have been too heavy."*

2014 – With Sir Richard Branson
Mawano Kambeu pictured with Virgin Group founder Sir Richard Branson during his visit to Zambia.

Those were also dangerous years. Some of the projects he worked on, from bus ticketing to government system deployments, made enemies of entrenched interests. He recalls receiving threats to his safety, sometimes through intermediaries, warning him to be careful. "I'd get calls from people saying, *'Ish, people here are talking about you, saying when we find him, kalya aka ma glassi ka Dot Com kalamona,'"* he says quietly. " *That was the backdrop. It was tough, and scary."*

Mawano describes that period as perhaps the lowest point of his life, maybe even worse than his time in America. At least in America, he had nothing, so there was nothing to lose. But this time was different. He had climbed so high, built a name, a company, and a future, only to lose it all. To the outside world, he kept fighting and appeared brave, but he admits that behind the scenes, he was having another silent, dangerous battle with depression.

THE STAFF JOKINGLY BEGAN CALLING MAWANO LAZARUS OR BA LAZO "THEY THOUGHT I WAS DEAD AND BURIED, BUT SOMEHOW I CAME BACK..

After months of uncertainty and difficult conversations, Kukula Capital and eVentures Africa Fund made the decision to reinvest and pump additional capital into the business. The early projects, Plans A through C, had not worked, and the new ideas and projects that might replace them were still fragile and untested, yet promising. The investors understood the stakes clearly: they could cut their losses and write off the investment, or reinvest to give the company a fighting chance. What convinced them was not optimism, but the persistence they had witnessed: the steady board reports, the refusal to miss meetings, and a founder who had kept the business alive without taking a salary.

They decided to back him once more, injecting fresh capital into the company. When they also learned of his personal financial troubles, they gave him a lump-sum payment to help him get back on his feet. Around the same time, his father, who had long retired from government service, finally received his pension. His parents, who had already invested their life savings to give Mawano his start in America, also gave him part of the pension to keep the dream alive. Those two acts of faith, one professional, one deeply personal, pulled him back from the brink, allowing him to restructure his debts and begin the slow path to recovery.

At the Kukula offices, the staff jokingly began calling Mawano Lazarus or Ba Lazo *"They thought I was dead and buried, but somehow I came back,"* he says. Friends joked it must be witchcraft. *"Who loses investors $500,000 yet ends up getting more money? Who does that?"* he laughs.

February 2015 – Harvard Business School, Boston
Dot Com Zambia team wins first prize at the Harvard Business School Africa Business Club's New Venture Competition.

This second chance, as Mawano calls it, changed everything. He approached the company differently from that day forward. The company would now be leaner, hungrier, and far more disciplined. One of the first decisions was to part with the original e-commerce division, the business that started Dot Com Zambia. That division was sold to employees for one kwacha, allowing them to continue to operate it independently under the name Click & Connect. The fully independent company remains in existence today. Mawano has no shares or stake of any kind in Click & Connect. His only payment is the joy he receives from seeing the people who built it with their own hands alongside him now own and make a living from the company. Alfred Malambo, Dot Com Zambia's first employee, is one of them.

After shedding the e-commerce division, he focused entirely on technology and completing the projects that survived the collapse. The rebuild began with just four people: Mawano and three IT engineers. He was once again the lone sales and operating person, handling every meeting, every client, every deal. Around that time, Dot Com Zambia began developing electronic tolling and fleet-management technology, and Mawano personally took charge of driving it forward.

"I went back into New York sales beast mode,"

he recalls, tapping into the relentless energy and sharp instincts that had built his career years earlier. *"I spent two days at a weighbridge in Kapiri watching the flow of trucks to understand who the real customers in the tolling business were."* From there, he began pitching directly to companies by knocking on doors, unannounced, across Lusaka, Solwezi, Ndola, and Kitwe's industrial areas. *"In Zambia, people always say you need connections. I had none. I just showed up and said, 'Here's how I can help you. Who do I need to talk to?'"*

That relentless drive paid off. One by one, clients came on board: Capital Fisheries, Zambia Sugar, Shoprite, Zambeef, Mount Meru, Shaann Carriers and many others followed.

"With Zambeef in particular, I had no connections at all," he recalls. *"I went straight to their Huntley Farm to meet their fleet management team, and later their managers at the corporate office. They put me through the wringer with due diligence. They peppered me with question after question, trying to work out whether I was for real."*

2016 – Dot Com Zambia Campaign
Promotional flyer featuring musician JK and former Zambia national footballer Jacob Mulenga endorsing Dot Com Zambia.

2017 – Southern Connecticut State University Billboard
Billboard featuring Mawano Kambeu erected by Southern Connecticut State University in recognition of his entrepreneurial success

Mawano laughs as he remembers a specific afternoon. *"They took me to Katuba Toll Plaza to see if the toll staff would recognise me, which they did, and to test the system themselves. The eToll technology was very new then, so they wanted to be sure everything worked. Eventually, the deal got done."*

He reflects on why that moment stayed with him. Back in late 2017, Zambeef became his fourth eToll customer and his largest client to date. *"That was the first sign that I was punching above my weight class, once I landed them, that was it, the sky felt like the limit."*

From that point, the company began to scale rapidly as revenue surged. From ZMW 38 million to more than ZMW 620 million over a few short years. And projections for 2026 are already on track to exceed ZMW 800 million. The company now serves over 300 corporate customers nationwide, spanning tolling, payments, and technology infrastructure.

This year (2025), Dot Com Zambia is set to record its most profitable year yet, with profits exceeding K15 million and a K5.42 million dividend paid out to shareholders. But that success has also come with a heavy regulatory price: *"We will pay K6.5 million in income tax-related charges alone this year,"* Mawano says, wincing. It is not the payment itself that troubles him, but what it represents — a policy framework that often rewards external capital while offering little encouragement for Zambian companies taking the harder path of formal growth through the stock exchange, raising the same type of capital under far less favourable conditions. The irony is clear: those who build locally often face the toughest climb.

Today, the company is valued in the millions of dollars and has grown into one of Zambia's leading technology-infrastructure firms, now preparing for its initial public offering and gearing up for rapid expansion.

EPILOGUE: BY THE GRACE OF GOD

Reflections written by Mawano Kambeu

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.”

John Quincy Adams

October 2025 – IPO Team, Livingstone
Jeremy Mwafulilwa (left), Tue Andersen (centre), and Mawano Kambeu (right) in Livingstone.

I hold the titles of Founder and Managing Director of Dot Com Zambia. The title of Founder will never change. That is mine forever. But the Managing Director role is a title that must be earned every single day. At the end of the day, Dot Com Zambia is no longer a private company I own. It is a publicly owned company built for the benefit of its owners, the public.

This journey has spanned well over twenty years, from my early days in America to where I stand today. When I think about how far I have come, and how far this company has come, I cannot explain it by logic alone. The only explanation is God’s grace, and I am a truly blessed individual.

In America, I was working odd jobs, not knowing how I would even begin to pay for school. I had already dropped out twice. The least expensive university option I could find cost about $18,000 a year in tuition alone, an amount that felt completely impossible no matter how hard I worked. I simply could not see a way forward. Perhaps in that moment, God saw that my heart was in the right place, that despite every obstacle, I refused to give up. I could not accept that the way I was living was my destiny. A quiet part of me believed there was something greater ahead, even if I could not yet name it. I prayed constantly back then. Not for money, even though I desperately needed it, but for strength. Every day, I said the same prayer. *“God, give me strength, and thank you for the gift of life, for everything you have done for me, and for what you will continue to do for me. And forgive my trespasses, as I forgive those who have trespassed against me.”*

And then, almost inexplicably, things began to change. It started with a mistaken phone call that ultimately brought me into the mailroom of one of the largest financial services companies in the world. It was the customer service manager who took the time to get to know me. He did not see a young man with no degree or work experience in financial services. He must have seen some measure of potential, because he then went out of his way to secure a permanent position for me. That single act opened every door that followed. And remarkably, that same company would go on to pay for my entire education, both my undergraduate and master's degrees.

So really, how could anyone convince me that it wasn't God's grace at work?

What happened in America taught me that grace does not arrive once. It returns in different forms, often when hope is thinnest. Years later, during Dot Com Zambia's most difficult chapter, I would learn that truth again.

And through all of it, one lesson has never left me: every breakthrough in my life began because someone chose to open a door. There was Jason, Jito, Mr Chabs, Tue, Vincent and their respective teams at Kukula Capital and eVentures Africa Fund. There are many others, too numerous to name, whose encouragement, guidance, or simple acts of belief shaped the path that brought me here. And beyond them were the customers who chose to buy from us, often without realising that each purchase helped carry the dream of this company forward, from its earliest days to the present.

Today, as we prepare for our Initial Public Offering, I am reminded that going public was never the easiest path. There were far simpler ways to raise money. But this decision was never about convenience; it has always been about conviction.

For me, an IPO represents more than capital. It speaks to national development, to proving what is possible for Zambian entrepreneurs, and to creating a path that others can follow. I have always believed that we, as Zambians, must learn to trust and organise our own capital, and that ordinary people should participate directly in the growth and ownership of the companies that shape our country's future. In many ways, that is what this IPO is about. It is a different way of thinking about ownership, progress, and shared opportunity.

Over the years, as Dot Com Zambia brought in new investment to grow, my ownership gradually moved from 100 percent to smaller percentages. I have always believed it is better to own 10 percent of something big and meaningful than 100 percent of something small. Growth requires people. When you stand alone, you carry the entire weight alone. But when you open the door to others, you multiply strength, capacity, and possibility. If there is one lesson my journey has made clear, it is that I became stronger because people stood with me, opened doors for me, and helped turn possibility into progress. That is how this company became greater than the sum of its parts.

As this chapter of my story draws to a close, marked by Dot Com Zambia's listing on the Lusaka Securities Exchange, I look back with profound gratitude and humility. This journey has taken nineteen years. Some might ask, *"Should it have taken that long?"* Probably not. Yet perhaps it was meant to, because every challenge, every delay, and every detour shaped both the person and the company that stand here today.
The success we now celebrate did not come from perfect timing or flawless planning; it came from persistence, grace, and faith in something larger than me.

In the end, there is no formula that can explain it, no set of steps that, if repeated, would

guarantee the same result.

There is only faith. There is perseverance. And there is — as this chapter is called —

THE GRACE OF GOD

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