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A Better Life Beckons in Africa

U.S. Downturn Drives Immigrant Professionals Back Home

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KISUMU, Kenya -- With the U.S. economy in turmoil, his job as a truck driver no longer secure and his upwardly mobile life in the Dallas suburbs in jeopardy, James Odhiambo decided it was time for a change.

He wanted a healthier lifestyle for his family, less anxiety, fewer 14-hour days. So he recently traded his deluxe apartment, the pickup truck, the dishwasher and \$4.99 McDonald's combos for life in a place he considers relatively better: sub-Saharan Africa.

"Right now I'm no stress, no anxiety," said Odhiambo, 34, relaxing in his family home in this western Kenyan city along the shores of Lake Victoria. "Think of it this way: When I was in the U.S., I was close to 300 pounds. Now, I'm like 200. The biggest thing for me was quality of life."

While that may seem counterintuitive to Americans accustomed to bleaker images of Africa, recent studies have documented the flight of immigrant professionals from the United States to their home countries. Chinese and Indian workers increasingly say they see better opportunities and lifestyles at home. And diaspora associations of Nigerians, Ghanaians, Kenyans and other Africans say their members -- mostly from middle-class backgrounds -- are joining the exodus, choosing life in the land of slow Internet connections and power outages over the pressures of recession-era America.

"I personally know many people who are going back," said Erastus Mong'are, who works as a program manager for an insurance company in Delaware and heads an association of Kenyans living there. "The people I know here work two or three jobs just to make ends meet, while in Kenya -- despite its problems -- people seem more happy. They seem to be getting more time with family. More relaxed. Here, if my neighbor sees I've parked in his spot, he becomes so upset."

In a broad sense, the return migration to Africa is in line with studies suggesting that despite persistent poverty and civil unrest in places such as Congo, Somalia and Sudan, much of the continent has been buoyed in recent years by a sense of optimism driven by economic growth. Pew Research Center studies tracking global attitudes have found that people's level of satisfaction with their quality of life is rising across much of Africa, while it has stayed level or decreased in the United States. For Odhiambo, disillusionment with the American way of life grew more or less with his waistline.

As a lean young man, he moved to the United States to attend a community college in Upstate New York, an idea nurtured by images of American life he saw on television growing up in a middle-class family in Kenya: "Diff'rent Strokes," "The Six Million Dollar Man," "Beverly Hills, 90210."

"You'd see all these manicured lawns, all this organization," he recalled on a recent day, while having a long lunch at an outdoor cafe without once looking at his watch.

He arrived in the mid-1990s with a sense of possibility in a land promising immigrants a better life. After college, he moved to Texas and worked as a long-haul truck driver, crisscrossing the country delivering auto parts, televisions, soda bottles and big containers from [China](#). He marveled at innovations such as the car cup holder; he was inspired by government efficiencies that made it possible to get a driver's license in one day. And as his pay improved, he and his wife moved into a luxury apartment complex outside Dallas called Sonoma Grande at the Legends.

"It was really nice," Odhiambo recalled, noting that it had a pool, a Jacuzzi, a gym and other treats unheard of in Kenya.

But as his workdays grew longer, he hardly enjoyed any of those amenities. He worked 14-hour shifts trying to keep up with

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his \$800 monthly rent, payments on a new Ford Ranger pickup, health insurance that did not cover a pair of tinted prescription glasses needed for long hours at the wheel, and bills driven by must-haves such as air conditioning.

"I couldn't get any exercise at all, and I was restricted to truck stops for food," he said. "I'd go for the buffet -- meat with gravy, fried chicken -- or fast food. I didn't have time for my daughters. In the movies, they only show one side of America."

His daughters were approaching school age, and they would have attended a public school with metal detectors and gangs. He said the alarmingly regular reports of shootings at schools, churches or offices frightened his family more than the post-election violence sweeping parts of Kenya at the time. The recession only confirmed a decision he and his wife had been mulling for a while: It was time to go.

Earlier this year, they packed up, explaining to their confused American friends that Congo's rebel fighting was thousands of miles from Kenya, and that no, Odhiambo is not a king back home.

And so, on this day, Odhiambo toiled around Kisumu, a medium-size city full of government workers and small-business people, street hawkers selling newspapers and vendors selling tennis shoes dangling from tree limbs. He drove the modest Toyota Starlet he bought for \$1,500 cash past a minor traffic jam of bicycle taxis and people pushing carts loaded with plastic jugs of water.

"This city has grown, but they still have the water system from the colonial days," he said, not seeming to care.

He drove past a golf course and through an upscale neighborhood of bamboo hedges and pink bougainvillea, noting the few cars in driveways.

"Here, if you have a car, you'll share it with four or five people," he said. "In the States, if there are five people in the house, they have five cars. There's a lot of 'this is mine.' "

With the money he saved in the States, Odhiambo figures he has a six-month cushion during which he plans to start his own business -- a kind of private coast guard for Lake Victoria, modeled on the community fire stations in the United States. But because of the famously slow Kenyan bureaucracy, his business registration is taking weeks, leaving Odhiambo with something he rarely had in America -- time.

He is farming some in his mother's village, where he has another family home, and getting back into his old ham radio hobby. He enjoys afternoons watching small planes buzz in for a landing above the rolling green sugar and tea farms around Kisumu.

His family lives in his mother-in-law's tidy -- and paid for -- one-story, cinder-block house. There are no credit cards in Kenya, and mortgages are just catching on, so life mostly runs on cash.

"Here, you really can live on about \$5 a day," Odhiambo said.

Instead of running a dishwasher, the Odhiambos wash their plates by hand. Instead of running an air conditioner, they open the windows. Instead of shopping for groceries at Wal-Mart, Odhiambo's wife heads to the local market and bargains for fresh tomatoes, onions and the Kenyan equivalent of collard greens, sukuma wiki. She has dropped four dress sizes.

"Here, you can't say 'Give me a number 4,' " he said, pulling into his neighborhood, where a few goats trotted along the dirt road, and some elementary-school children in gray uniforms shuffled home.

"See that?" he said. "Think of that! In America, you'd never let kids walk home" alone.

Odhiambo has noticed that his girls, who are 4 and 2 and will attend a private international school here, are becoming less leery of strangers and the outdoors in general, an attitude he says they learned in the United States.

"When we first got here, people would say, 'Why don't they go outside and play?' " he said. "They were scared."

Gradually, though, the family is relaxing.

"Right now, I'm just waiting for my business registration," Odhiambo said, savoring a warm sunset breeze. "Here, the pace is a whole lot slower."

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