



You Only Leave When Home Is the Mouth of a Shark

By Wanjeri Gakuru



For some reason, we only ever seemed to climb up to the waving bay at the airport at night. Crowding around the large windows, a gaggle of bundled up pre-teens up way past their bedtime. We'd stare at the rows of shiny metal birds; miracles of science, about to leap into the inky blue skies. We imagined our kinfolk nestled within one of those bellies. The grownups were scattered around us chatting among themselves; recalling a similar journey, as prayerful escort or terrified traveller.

The parents were a picture of sadness and pride. Soon, they'd choose a plane for us to wave at. Pressed together with strangers we'd mark its confident ascension, high and bright and pulled by an invisible chariot of fire until it became a tiny speck. It didn't matter that it likely wasn't the right aircraft we cheerfully sent off. Going down the dark stairwell afterwards, we were all countrymen saluting folks who would likely not return.

We didn't know it then, but it had all begun years before. In 1980, Kenya took its first Structural Adjustment loan from the World Bank. After nearly two solid decades of independence and relative economic stability, Kenya replaced the import-substitution policies it had pursued since independence with an open, liberalized trading regime. It was intended to "stabilize" the economy, which was under the pressure of debt repayments.

Did it work? The short answer is: no.

We took a second loan in 1982, same year as the attempted coup. The latter had an especially profound effect on how we were governed from then on, intensifying paranoia and tribalism in governance. But even ambitious economic plan, which looked good on paper, was designed to hurt the most vulnerable. SAPs required poor countries to reduce spending on things like health, education and infrastructure, while debt repayment and privatisation were made the priority. In effect, the IMF and World Bank [demanded](#) that poor nations lower the standard of living of their people.

Around that same time, Kenyans also suffered through the 1992 elections—where the government borrowed heavily from local banks and caused inflation—and the 1993 Goldenberg scandal, in which 10% of the country's GDP was squirreled away. To where? We didn't know. But we knew it was bad.



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No wonder my late father worked it out so that my eldest sister got on a plane to Germany to work as an *au pair* for a year. It was 1999 and at least one of us in the family would enter the new millennium with hope. To raise money for her departure, we circulated pledge cards, secured the family's most generous friend as guest of honour and held a *harambee*. These fundraisers were a common practice among the middle class for travels abroad. We still hold them today but largely for funerals and medical reasons. (One day we need to unpack why churches somehow manage to remain bankrolled through whatever hardships. The same goes for wedding committees).

But back then *harambees* were festive occasions. The soon-to-be voyager stood coyly at the front, maybe draped in shiny tinsel, perhaps holding out a *kiondo* into which their donations were danced forward and dropped into. Folks were so generous; they didn't just support academic trips. Sometimes it was to aid a lucky Green Card lottery winner. Only 50,000 US immigrant visas are available through that national lottery. It seemed that Kenyans snatched up quite a number. I was always either a raffle ticket seller (where the grand prize was something like a large towel) or I sold handkerchiefs at inflated prices. All to send so-and-so *majuu*.

However, it was harder to be generous as the economy sank lower and lower. The cold eyes from the portrait that bore down at us from the walls of our offices and schools and at the start of news bulletins were unrelenting. That is, until the opposition parties created a rainbow and pressed Moi into retirement in 2002. Nonetheless, my family—now a battered middle class—was still plotting how to send more people out there. Within a year we scrimped and saved and shipped off a cousin to America.

She was the last of us to go this way.

Yoked here by the fallout of economic distress of yesteryears, my family, like many other Kenyan households found studying abroad a luxury. It was still possible but even the brightest amongst us could not summon the *harambee* spirit. By the mid-2000s folks had to secure full or partial scholarships, and still finesse church, work and society trips to cross the Atlantic Ocean. That is, if they could jump through the many hoops needed to even secure a visa, and the irony of sitting for an English proficiency exam in a former British colony.



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When it was my time to enrol in university, Uganda and Tanzania were my best options for an alternative higher learning experience. By then I had just become an orphan and that's what literally pulled on the purse strings and got me into a journalism class.

Today, my 20-year-old nephew's best bet at a good education is turning to the Internet. It has become the salvation of the jaded millennial, myself included. Sure, folks can attend local colleges and polytechnics but the World Wide Web is the best university they can attend, it holds all the books they cannot buy and has become the employer, the platform and marketplace they seek.

Maybe flying out isn't such a big deal when information is pouring out of your phone and laptop. The ability to viably contribute to the web has turned everyday people into celebrities and birthed new occupations. Not forgetting the hundreds of dollars made monthly from vaguely suspect pursuits (online writing) to the definitely illegal (selling of pirated DVDs). Young people are somehow finding a way to make it in these harsh economic times.

If nothing else, the Internet has made the strongest assault against the almighty lawyer-engineer-doctor trifecta, but it can't save everyone. An impossible wage gap, brutal unemployment and perilous short-term *kibarua* jobs still persist. To quote poet Warsan Shire, "No one leaves home, unless home is the mouth of a shark."

For those who still try and make their way out, Middle Eastern nations offer the lowest barrier of entry but at a terrible price. What are advertised as opportunities for domestic workers too often are a mask for modern-day slavery. Many, like Happiness Chweya, Mwanakombo Athman and Melsa Adhiambo Makhokha, return home in coffins. Those who narrowly escape recount tales of physical abuse and sexual depravity.

Yet hundreds still flock the fraudulent job agencies, thousands more have their passports seized and cannot return home. Their desperate pleas secretly recorded circulate on Facebook and Twitter as horrific vox pops.

Equally stuck are the waving bay generation, those who left. No doubt they have it much better - at least financially (?) - than their counterparts across the seas but what does it mean to long for home for 5, 10, 20, 30, 40 years? To be torn between renewing an expired student visa and risking deportation, and sending home payments received under the table, miserly as they are. It means watching your father's funeral through the small window of a smartphone thousands of kilometres away and sobbing and sobbing because home is still the mouth of a shark.

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