



Your Dreams Are Not Valid Here

By Silas Nyanchwani



This time of year, October/ November, is the season when the United States runs their Electronic Diversity Visa Lottery, commonly known as the green card.

Globally, 20 million people fill it, with the hope of becoming part of the tight short list of the 50,000 people who eventually receive the American Permanent Resident Card, and a ticket to pursue the fabled American Dream (sometimes a nightmare).

In my early 20s, I used to nurse dreams of living in America. Most of my friends who never qualified for university used various means, dubious and straight, to enter America. And soon they were building mansions and buying plots around Nairobi as I chased my bachelor's degree. I remember one friend in particular who had been jobless in Nairobi and when the opportunity came, he left in such a huff, leaving with his small worldly possessions; a bag with three or four clothes, old shoes and nothing else. He has never stepped back 14 years down the line.

I joined University in the mid-2000s, when the Kibaki economy was booming. Sectors like higher education had expanded massively, opening doors to hundreds of thousands to access university education and creating employment and business opportunities such as never witnessed before. Local banks, hitherto operating as cooperative societies or community *chamas*, had become serious players in the industry. M-PESA had just been launched and Nairobi was being noticed in Africa and

indeed in the world finance markets. Real estate was booming. The media was flourishing, both mainstream platforms and lifestyle magazines were making stupendous profits. There was money to be made if you had the right skills.

For my first ever newspaper column (aged 21, no less), I was given a cheque of KSh7,500, inspiring me to pursue journalism. In my four years in campus, I supplemented the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) money with the wages from writing for local newspapers.

There was an air of optimism everywhere.

Then came the 2007 elections, followed by the post-election violence, coinciding with the 2008 global financial crisis, from which the world has never really recovered. In Kenya, we had barely started picking up the pieces from the post-election violence when a youthful duo came into office, who promised heaven and but have delivered hell, to the point where our economy is now in the doldrums.



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But I remember that through college and the ensuing years, we were proud of our country. The roads became better, Internet connectivity improved immensely, mobile technology grew, and Nairobi could afford anyone the best things in the world, barring traffic and pollution. Those of us in university hoped after graduation, we would get the six-figure salaries that our predecessors (classes of 2004-2008) were getting.

At the time, few of my friends had any ambition of leaving Kenya, save for those who were headed to graduate school. There were many reasons to stay. Many among those who traveled for further studies, or for whatever reason, did come back. And my Kenyan-American friends, advised me, "If you make at least KSh80,000 as net income, then you don't need to come and struggle in America."

It was a piece of advice we heeded, and after college, we were all looking for jobs that will guarantee KSh100,000. That was during the post-college euphoria, and by this time my obsession with "flying out" had diminished significantly. I started to believe I could 'make it' here in Kenya.

As a single young man, I enjoyed good income from my newspaper columns, and ultimately I got a permanent job with a local media organisation and decent pay nearly two and half years after graduation. People around me had more mixed fortunes. My spouse got a job after waiting for nearly three years after graduation. Most of my college friends waited longer, some in between jobs, more underemployed, others dropped through the cracks. The devolved government did rescue a few with jobs in the counties, but in my estimation only about half of the graduates in my year have been in steady employment or business.

Two years into my employment, the company I was working for laid off 300 workers, nearly a quarter of the workforce, in a purge that spared no one, from the young, to the middle-aged to the older folks. It was devastating. I only escaped the axe because I won a scholarship to graduate school that saw me spend a year in New York.

When I left for America, my entire clan accompanied me to the airport, knowing that the path to prosperity had just been opened. Their palpable excitement was understandable.

“Don’t ever come back, fetch your family and stay there,” they insisted. There were many more people who asked me to stay in America than those who advised me to come back – unlike just a few years before.

While in America, even with the telltale signs of a diseased and decaying economy, my acquaintances in US were all of the idea that I should play the system (basically marry my way into citizenship), or use whatever trick to stay there. But I was determined to come back, armed with youthful chutzpah and the idealism that my master’s degree from one of the world’s most premium universities will guarantee me a better life.



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I came back immediately after my studies – and two years later, I am worse off than I have ever been in my short adult life.

There are no jobs in the media, and or in my Plan B, academia – that has been ruined too.

The other day, for the first time since 2010, I went to a cybercafé. I hadn’t gone to browse – who does that anymore? I had gone to take the quality photo necessary filing in the DV-lottery, and I sat down and applied for the green card. And in the last few months, along with other friends, I have been visiting placement agencies that advise skilled adults on how to settle in countries like Canada or Australia.

When was the last time you passed near Nyayo House? You have probably seen the impossible crowds. One can safely assume that those looking for passports want out of the country for various reasons.

I happen to have worked with a few agencies that send Kenyans abroad, from low-skilled workers (to Dubai, Doha and other places in the Middle East), to high skilled labour (to Western countries mostly). So many of my folks, given the limited farming opportunities in the village, have moved to the Middle East and America, where most of them work on low-end, but better paying jobs that

anything the country can offer.

It is not just the manual labourers who want out of the country. Increasingly, people with university education are moving out of the country, reminiscent of the exodus witnessed in the 1980s and 1990s during the repressive regime of Moi, compounded by the Structural Adjustment Programs that saw the economy shrink so badly in the 1990s.

It is a quiet exodus.

One of the best things that come with age is the shattering of youthful idealism. You learn sooner than later that not all dreams are valid. You discover the ideal house you visualized, your dream car, and the neighbourhood you wanted to live in can be decidedly elusive. And as you grow older, you constantly adjust your expectations, adopting a cold-hearted selfishness, and pragmatism, for yourself and for your family.

I know at least six other friends who left the US and the UK, and at least four of them have had it so tough, the last I checked, they are at advanced stages of going back abroad to pursue a Ph.D. or looking for work as skilled immigrants. Never before I have ever been inundated with links for job applications and advice on how to emigrate to some of the better countries in the West; UK, Netherlands, Belgium, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the Scandinavian countries.

Yet the timing couldn't be worse. In the West, the rise of right-wing governments spurred by collapsing or stagnating economies has inspired a wave of xenophobia targeting foreigners, and dark-skinned immigrants are especially not welcome.

But even so, we want to leave. Because the economic prospects for men and women of my generation look dim. According to a Pew Research Center study in March this year, 54 per cent of Kenyans wanted to relocate. They cited corruption, the high cost of living, poor living standards, and search for better housing, healthcare and education opportunities. Life has become unbearable.



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And SAPs 2.0 are about to hit harder, as thousands of employees are set to lose jobs when the government sells 26 parastatals. With inflation, and the slow death of affordable public health care and education, the timing could not be worse.

I used to earn more as a student than I do as a grown-up adult, with a family and a daughter about to join school. Public schooling is in ruins, higher education in an irrecoverable mess, so much that

middle-class and upper-class parents have totally lost all the hope in public schools and send their children to expensive private schools, the better if they run a different “international system”. But private education is so expensive that kindergarten annual tuition fees in some of the average schools is more than what a university student pays for their tuition. And many millennial parents are not going to afford it.

For healthcare, half of the WhatsApp groups we are in are for fundraising for sick or deceased folks since families cannot afford to pay for their relatives’ healthcare in decent hospitals.

We know the Kenyans in the diaspora are often homesick. Given a chance, many would return. Indeed, their remittances tell a story of unshakeable faith in their motherland - in 2017, Kenyans [remitted over \\$1.9 billion](#) from the diaspora - but the government hardly accords them any significance.

“Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spares time when he goes abroad to meet Indians living in that country. President Uhuru Kenyatta rarely does it. But this helps build a connection between migrants and the motherland,” says Mukurima Muriuki, a Kenyan conflict resolution expert based in California, USA.

The same can be said of countries like Lebanon that keeps a database of professionals abroad. Or Ireland that taps into the potential of its expansive diaspora network. Israel too.

Similarly, the growth in industrialization as well as the information and technology rapid growth of the Asian tigers has been credited to returning immigrants, and the sustained ties ensure that both the host country and the motherland benefits.

In Kenya’s case, it feels like contempt towards those in the diaspora is always on constant display. Like the recent launch of direct flights to America that hardly involved members of the diaspora who ordinarily would make the bulk of the users of the flight.

But because we mostly send low-skilled workers who end up in menial jobs, there is little exchange of skills that can transform the country. More individuals end up in middling jobs, with no way to really contribute back home, beyond building an ancestral home (essentially, dead capital) and buying more meaningless pieces of land for lack of alternatives.

High skilled individuals often gain citizenship to the host country, and their brains end up benefitting the host country more than the mother country. Think of the late Professor Calestous Juma, a celebrated international authority in the application of science and technology for sustainable development worldwide, who was at Harvard University at the time of his death last year. If he stayed in Kenya, he probably would never have risen through the ranks - and would never have ascended to the status that Harvard afforded him. One can think of the top Kenyan academics, thinkers and writers who spend their lives in the Western institutions because their country has spurned them.

This country loses so much in terms of skills and ideas. And worse because we are not creative enough to utilize the diaspora beyond just remittances. We could use more transfer of skills and ideas.

Still, I am starting to think that when your country does not love you, you have no obligation to love it back.

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