

REPATS

An African Odyssey

Economic trouble in the West, rapidly expanding African economies and the end of many African civil conflicts are contributing to a rise in the number of African migrants returning to their home countries. Ten of them told their stories to *The Africa Report*

By **Rose Skelton** in Dakar

When South Sudanese pilot Amuch Ajawin moved back to Sudan after nearly a lifetime living in the United Kingdom, he struggled to fit in. “From the time I moved to Sudan,” he says, “I was treated like a foreigner. I dressed differently, I looked different, I don’t speak the local language, Arabic. To friends and relatives, they knew I was born in Sudan, but that didn’t make me a Sudanese.”

According to the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), from

July 2011 to November 2011, 350,000 people went back to Africa’s newest country when it declared independence. For Amuch, it was the opportunity to further his career as a pilot that took him back to the country where he was born. For others, it was the promise of being reunited with family after decades in the north, as many were there for work or to escape civil conflict.

There are 8.8 million African migrants living in Europe, North America and Australia. Small but increasing numbers of Africans are also starting to carve out a life for themselves in Asia ●●●





TRAVEL
AGENCY

SCHOOL

HOSPITAL

GARAGE

CLAP!

●●● and the Middle East, taking advantage of changing economic centres of gravity. Meanwhile, more than half of all African migrants – 13.2 million people – live on the continent itself, according to the Global Migrant Origin Database. Around 1.5 million Zimbabweans have migrated to South Africa in search of work, but after the xenophobic attacks on foreigners in 2011 many returned home. South Africa's police services say they currently deport around 300 undocumented migrants back to Zimbabwe every day. Emigrants, both within the continent and to the West, are a strong economic force and sent back \$60.4bn of remittances last year.

CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS

But there has been a sharp rise in the number of people returning to Africa, as business opportunities on the continent increase and the world economy stagnates. "We've been seeing an increase in returns from some countries because of job insecurity since the crisis hit," says Laura Lungarotti of the IOM. One in four Senegalese emigrants returns to Senegal within five years, and more than two-thirds are back within a decade, according to a 2008 study by the Migrations between Africa and Europe project (MAFE-Sénégal).

Many returnees want to be close to their families, live amongst their own people, reconnect with their religions or have simply had enough of being 'foreigners' in a foreign land. More and more, Africans want to come home to invest in their countries. The opportunities on offer back home are greater, says Nataly Woollett, a 40-year-old psychologist from South Africa who returned home after 15 years overseas. "If you have a good idea and you have momentum and initiative, you can get really involved in ways that you can't in more developed contexts," she says.

But assimilation after years away can be hard. Tidiane Sow, a mechanic now settled back in his hometown of Dakar, says he often hears people saying he is crazy because he came back from the United States and now spends his time under cars, his hands stained black with oil. "They feel I should be sitting in an office or bringing back a lot of money," he says. ●

A mixture of strange feelings



HEREWARD HOLLAND FOR TAR

SOUTH SUDANESE PILOT Born in Malakal, in what is now an independent South Sudan, Amuch Ajawin moved to the UK when he was three years old. In Juba, he struggles to fit in

"We are encouraged to stay and develop the country"

A much Ajawin, 33, was born in Malakal, a town of stubby buildings and mud huts that fans out on the west bank of the White Nile, and grew up in the UK. It was a youthful football injury that indirectly led him to qualify as a pilot and return to South Sudan. He travelled to Jordan to be operated on for a knee injury, where he met people from an aviation academy.

Two years later, he qualified as a pilot and found work in Sudan in the years before South Sudan seceded in 2011.

He had not planned to move back to Africa, but the opportunity to be a pilot was a good one. When Feeder Airlines relocated to Juba, the new country capital, Amuch moved too. "It has been very difficult for me," he admits, saying that he has a low and irregular salary. He also

moved his wife and daughter to Addis Ababa, where his wife is from, because of his long absences. "We are encouraged to stay and develop the country because we have been out," he says.

In April 2012, Feeder went through difficulties, and Amuch has not drawn a regular salary since then. He has been surviving on freelance work, and has found it difficult to bring the

and fresh opportunities



LIBYAN BUSINESSMAN Born in London, Mohammed Elkish went to Benghazi to start a family in 2009. When the revolution began, he became a spokesman for the National Transitional Council

“Things will straighten up”

When the revolution started, Mohammed Elkish was celebrating his marriage. The British Libyan, who worked in aviation sales and hospitality, most recently at London’s Heathrow Airport, had decided to move to Benghazi when the global economy began to stumble. “I wanted to get

married and settle down,” he says, “and profit- and business-wise, Benghazi for me was much, much better than London. It’s an emerging market.”

When the revolution against Muammar Gaddafi began in early 2011, Elkish considered leaving but decided to volunteer for the National Transitional

Council, coordinating interactions between its leaders and the media. “I thought that my international expertise would come in handy, and it did,” he says. He has since opened a travel company.

But there have also been downsides to moving. Following an operation, he has to return to London

for regular check-ups because he prefers the quality of medical treatment there. In spite of this, he thinks he made the right choice.

“I do not regret it. One way or another, things will straighten up. There was too much blood and lives lost for it all to go to waste.” ●

Pietro Musili
and **Rose Skelton**

experience he gained in the UK to South Sudan.

“I have approached ministries and proposed ways of implementing working hours, selecting people that are qualified to do the job and creating company procedures. Some listen and try, but others just look at me, as if to say, ‘Who are you trying to change our system?’”

But he is glad he returned. “I only intended to come back for two years, and now it has been six. It’s worth me staying a couple of years more. I think I have a better chance staying here than returning to the UK.” ●

James Copnall

CAMEROONIAN FARMER After studying and working in the United States for 27 years, Cornelius Ndimba is back in the village of Ngeptang to run a plantation and set up a school

“It was difficult fitting in at first”

Tucked among the hills of Cameroon’s North West Region is Ngeptang, a lowly hamlet with a population hardly surpassing 2,500.

Among them, Cornelius Ndimba sticks out. His fluent English, mannerisms and style of dress are different from those of his village peers. The 64-year-old is a returnee from the US, where he spent 27 years after leaving in 1983 to further his education.

“I actually abandoned a job as retail manager with an oil company, Gulf Oil, to go gain experience so I could come back here and develop my community in my own way,” he says. “I was barely 25 years old when I left and, looking back, my community was in dire need of development.

I believed going to study abroad would enable me to bring home solutions to our development drawbacks.”

While in the US, he obtained a bachelor’s degree in education and a master’s in business administration. In 2008, while still in the US, he established a 15-hectare oil palm plantation in Ngeptang. The business has so far trained and permanently employed 15 villagers. Now in Ngeptang, he spends part of his time offering lessons for free at the lone primary school.

“It was difficult fitting in at first. No electricity, no internet, no pipe-borne water and so on. But my five kids and their mother, who is Cameroonian, are now used to the situation. My biggest challenge is implementing what I brought back knowledge-wise. I plan to start up a college here, but things unfold rather very slowly,” he says. ●

Ntaryike Divine Jr
in Ngeptang





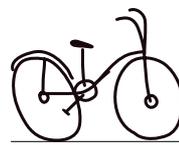
RESTA NYAMWANZA FOR TAR

ZIMBABWEAN TEACHER When Stephen Mazibisa left Bulawayo in 2008 to earn more money teaching maths in Johannesburg, he did not expect an attack to force him back

"I do not have to worry about personal security"

There came a point when Stephen Mazibisa decided the \$370 per month he was earning as a maths teacher in Bulawayo could no longer sustain his family. "That is what forced me to join the great trek to South Africa," says the 37 year old. In October 2008, Mazibisa left for Johannesburg to teach at Thomas Mofolo Secondary School in Soweto, where he earned R19,500 (\$1,950) per month. Getting work and residence permits was an expensive process, and he religiously sent between R8,000 to R10,000 to his family each month.

Before the FIFA World Cup in 2010, people frustrated by high unemployment rates vented their anger on foreigners. In a wave of xenophobic violence, Mazibisa saw his Nigerian neighbours beaten and raped. Mazibisa was assaulted by his students with a baseball bat, leaving him with head injuries and fractures to his arms. "What pained me most was none of my family members cared to visit me, but they all kept sending messages demanding money." He packed his bags, which his family was not happy about. "Instead of sympathising with me for the suffering I went through, I was subjected to insults." He is now back in Bulawayo teaching maths and sociology. "The money may not be enough, but I am happy that I do not have to worry about personal security," he said. "Financial benefits cannot compensate lost time being with your family." ● **Thabo Bhebhe** in Bulawayo



MOROCCAN MANAGER Jobs in Switzerland and Dubai made it easy for Mehdi Tazi Riffi to visit Morocco frequently before returning in 2010

"There has to be a sense that you can achieve something"

For Mehdi Tazi Riffi, who runs the TangerMed Free Zone, a vast industrial complex next to the port, the decision to return cannot simply be a comparison between salary or quality of life abroad and what is available at home: "There has to be a sense that you can achieve something, that you want to contribute to the development of your country. And when you have that, it makes it easier to face the hurdles you will naturally face when you come back." Tazi Riffi misses the diversity of cultural backgrounds he encountered in Europe and the Emirates, but still feels Moroccans have it easier than other Africans on their return, "because, at least where I worked, Moroccans would go back more often, say every one

or two years, so that the links were still there."

Tazi Riffi left Morocco after university to work for Nokia in Switzerland in 1998. He put a toe back in Moroccan waters in 2004 when the initial planning for the free zones was done. But after a few months he went to help set up a company in Dubai, returning in March 2010 to take up his current job. He says the majority of his countrymen from his year at university who left at the same time have now come home, mostly to work in the private sector.

He thinks it is easier to go back to Morocco now because the country is different. "The country has changed so much over the last decade, in terms of cultural attitudes, compared to how it was when I was a boy". ●

Nicholas Norbrook
in Tangiers



GUILLAUME MOLLE



JENEVIE AKEN FOR TAR

NIGERIAN ACTRESS Ade Laoye left behind the theatrical stages of the US for Nollywood. She is critical of the acting industry in Lagos but is happy to be near friends and family

“It meant taking a huge leap of faith”

Actress Ade Laoye, 29, had been back in her home town Lagos for less than a year when she pulled off her first Nollywood film. After 11 years in the United States working in theatre in Philadelphia and New Jersey, she decided it was time to move back home. “It meant taking

a huge leap of faith and stepping out into the unknown, but opening myself up to a new world of possibilities,” she says with an American accent peppered with the latest Nigerian slang. She had felt restless for some time and wanted to make a change. After a short visit to Nigeria,

she found herself longing to return. A year later, she bought a one-way ticket to Lagos. But living in Lagos can be challenging, she says. “Here, you have to be way more aggressive and borderline harsh in order to get things done. It’s also hard to find people you can trust, who aren’t just waiting for an opportunity to take advantage of you.”

Laoye’s life is a whirlwind of networking, trying to meet people in the industry who could help her acting career. “I tapped into my own personal network and asked my family and friends for contacts,” she says. “I made

many phone calls and sent many emails. Eventually, I started meeting the right people and doors started opening. You also have to always be prepared for anything.” She finds that the lack of industry rules or a centralised hub for information – as there is in the US – makes work in Nigeria harder. Ultimately, she is glad she returned. When she performed in Lagos, her father was able to see her on stage for the first time. “I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished so far, and I’m certainly looking forward to what’s to come.” ●

Monica Mark in Lagos

RWANDAN BUSINESSMAN Frederic Ngirabacu returned to Rwanda after graduating with a degree in business in Belgium and now helps businessmen in Kigali improve their operations

“I can add more value in Africa than in Europe”

When he left Rwanda in December 1994 at the age of 18, Frederic Ngirabacu left behind a country devastated by genocide. Back in Kigali, Frederic says he is in the right place: “I can add more value in Africa than in Europe.” When the genocide first began, Ngirabacu’s family spent three months on the run. Once the killings ended, his family settled in Brussels. As a student at the *Université de Liège*, Ngirabacu was sure that he would one day run his own business. “Rwanda was just a coincidence.

I was open to going anywhere on the continent, and I’m still open to going somewhere else,” he explains. Joining telecoms company Tigo, Ngirabacu went to Kigali in 2009. In 2011, he started his own management consultancy.

Although Rwanda has had a lot of infrastructure development, Ngirabacu says that poor business education has made it difficult to find capable employees. He plans to expand his company across the continent: “Africa is where the opportunities are,” he says. ●

Billie McTernan



ROSE SKELTON

SENEGALESE MECHANIC After 17 years working as a mechanic in New York and Philadelphia, Tidiane Sow returned to Dakar. Now he is the go-to man to service BMWs and Porsches

"I thought, I can't keep doing this: working, playing, not saving money"

It was a shock for Tidiane Sow when he first set foot in Dakar in 2010 after almost two decades living in the United States, working first as a mechanic for a New York cab owner, then at Ford and Chrysler. "Did I come from here?" he recalls asking himself. When he left Senegal as a troublesome

teenager, the roads were paved, people had money and his parents were relatively young. When he came back in 2010, the streets of his neighbourhood were full of potholes and his parents had grown old. Sow, 40, had been worrying about the fact that although he sometimes earned as much

as \$2,000 a week, he never had any savings. "I had everything I wanted. It was work hard, play hard. But it came to a certain point where I thought, I can't keep doing this: working, playing, not saving money. It made me realise I needed to go back." Taking over the role as head of the family in the

wake of his father's death, Sow started a mechanic's workshop. It is one of the only ones in Senegal that can work on Porsches and BMWs, which increasingly ply the streets of Dakar. "I can make money here," he said to himself. Despite his wealthy clients, his workshop remains a modest outfit in the garage of the house he grew up in, spilling into the sandy and oil-stained street outside. His strict work ethic has led to high staff turnover. "This is Senegal, man," he says in his New York drawl. "You say come at 8 o'clock, they show up at 10 o'clock. They show up for two or three days, they take a day off."

Sow often hears people saying he was crazy to go back. "It's very hard staying here," he says, "but at the same time, you feel at home. Here I work and feed my family, that's the difference." He has married his secretary and built a house. He says he does not regret going away, but he regrets not coming back often to visit.

"If I had come often, I would have got the equipment I wanted to suit Senegal better," he says. ●

Rose Skelton in Dakar

SOUTH AFRICAN PSYCHOLOGIST After working with trauma patients in New York, Nataly Woollett returned home to help victims of domestic violence

"I wanted to come back and give back"

While working as a psychologist specialising in trauma in New York in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks, Nataly Woollett, 40, also worked with undocumented migrants,

many of whom struggled to get access to health services. The people she worked with had limited resources, like those she worked with in South Africa. "My history here primed me for trauma work. I worked with people who were marginalised in both contexts." After eight years in the US, on top of years in London working in an investment bank and training as an art therapist, she decided it was time to move back to Johannesburg. "I wanted to come back

and give back in my professional capacity," she says. "I felt a sense of guilt about not giving back to my own environment."

When she moved back in 2011, it was partly due to homesickness. "It's a hopeful time, even if it is challenging. I didn't want to miss what was happening here politically." Two years ago, Woollett and a group of psychologists and lawyers set up an organisation to support victims of domestic violence. Woollett now works in HIV treatment and prevention. Much of her work is based in the inner-city area of Hillbrow. "The people coming back and the migrants coming into South Africa make it an amazing place. Most people who come here want to get stuck in. This sort of energy is hopeful." ●

Emilie Venables



CONGOLESE AGRIBUSINESS WORKER

Padre Kibangoud is part of the growing China-Africa ties. After finishing his degree in Jinan, he went on to work in Ghana

“Going back was far from their minds”

When Padre Kibangoud, 28, received his admission forms in 2005 for a university in Shandong Province, China, he did not speak English or Mandarin and he had never set foot outside Congo-Brazzaville. Obtaining a visa to study at a Western university proved difficult and expensive, so his father decided to send him to China. The details of the lonely journey to Jinan are etched in his mind. “When I arrived on the university campus after a five-hour train trip and finally sat down in my room, I broke down in tears.”

As he completed his master’s degree in automation and control engineering, an Asian agribusiness giant came to recruit young talent.

“More than 30 [African] students attended the first company presentations,” Kibangoud says. “Most students planned to move on to Europe or the United States after getting a degree. Going back home was far from their minds.”

Kibangoud says his future lies in Africa. “I come from an oil-producing country, and I decided early on that I should orient myself toward a profession that will be useful in the oil and gas industry.” For nearly two years, he worked at vegetable-oil extraction plants in China before accepting a transfer to Ghana.

He says he will go back to Congo. “Ghana is interesting because it’s very different from Congo. I’ve always wanted to work for a big company where I can learn new things and improve myself.” ● **Clementine Calvé**



OPINION

You just got back?

Repats fill the malls and restaurants of Lagos, so here are some tips for anyone who has recently returned from the United States or Europe



Tolu Ogunlesi

Journalist,
poet and
author

When I was growing up, IJGBs – ‘I just got backs’ – were a rare commodity because in the ‘80s and ‘90s hardly anyone ever ‘got back’. It made far more sense to ‘get away’. Everyone who could and many who could not became IJWGAs: ‘I just wanna get aways’. Life, more or less lived staring down AK-47s and in the absence of working phones, electricity, Zinger Burgers and lattes, was pretty awful.

Today, it is a different story. Everyone now wants to be an IJGB. There is now even a fancy name for them: ‘repatriate’ or ‘repat’. Loads of Nigerians have been flooding back, tempted by Facebook photos of D’Banj shows and movie screenings and shopping malls and Lagos weddings. And, of course, by that endless stream of ‘Africa-rising-Nigeria-bouncing’ headlines. We can safely classify IJGBs into two camps: the ‘Temps’ and the ‘Stays’. The Temps come every first week of December, leave just after Christmas and are responsible for the overcrowding of malls, cinemas and restaurants. They are easy to spot: shorts-and-singlet-wearing dudes and dudettes wandering around clutching water bottles and complaining about the heat. The Stays are the ones who have moved back for good. They come armed with all sorts: MBAs, non-profit passions, start-up ideas and enough impractical thinking to defuse a nuclear arsenal.

It is the Stays the following advice is meant for:

- 1 Life is tougher these days. Once upon a time your accent guaranteed you a job, the sort that came with a company car and apartment. Now you have to compete with homegrown IJGB accents, picked up from MTV, *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* and *Sex and the City*.
- 2 Learn Pidgin, and please drop the IJGB accent when speaking Pidgin. Not very many things are more sickening than a gonna-wanna-Pidgin.
- 3 Respect yourself. That means not making a fuss over sums that would be considered chicken change.
- 4 Never forget that this is not and will never be America or London. Drop all the “in America” prefaces to rants and ramblings.
- 5 Eat what you’re given, dammit! If you’re vegetarian, cook and eat at home. Don’t go around complaining how hard it is to find vegetarian pepper soup in town.
- 6 Finally, join an IJGB union. If you’re too busy to face-meet to discuss the tragic impossibility of finding “real coffee” in Lagos, join an IJGB BlackBerry Messenger or WhatsApp group. ●