

PEOPLE

Off to America, with good luck and... \$50

In 1994, Kiondo set off for the US in the hope of landing a scholarship while there. The only American he knew was only an acquaintance back in Tanzania who had agreed to guarantee his application for the scholarship. He also had some \$50 to his name....



GOOD BYE, GOOD LUCK. Although Kiondo says he is not superstitious, he soon learnt that anyone destined for Idaho, USA, needed all the best wishes that he could get.

By Mwendoshah Mifanga

Greyson Kiondo arrived at the State University of New York in Binghamton, from his home village of Uchira in Moshi, Kilimanjaro region with only \$50 in his pocket. That was just over 15 years ago.

Today, Kiondo is the president of Kilimanjaro International, a consulting firm with a portfolio of projects worth several million dollars and fast expanding through several countries in Africa and beyond.

There are certain things that people say to us that we don't always think too much of depending, especially on who they are. As he reflects on his life's journey today, Kiondo remembers many things, but the seemingly routine "good luck" wishes that he got on his way to the United States still stand out.

The first came as he applied for a visa as a prospective foreign student at the US embassy in Dar es Salaam. Kiondo still remembers the consular officer handing him his passport with the words, "good luck." The immigration officer at Kennedy airport in New York also said the same thing to him as he waved Kiondo on to the Customs checkpoint.

Then, later, as he was trying to take advantage of a zero deposit promotional offer and was Kilimanjaro's first business account at Chase Manhattan Bank, the elderly bank teller

remarked on the uniqueness of the company's name and how it reminded her of her father's regard for the Ernest Hemingway story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

As the teller handed him his promotional gifts—a gym bag and a coffee mug—along with the company's first checkbook, he remembers that she sweetly said, "Good luck, honey."

Although one might argue that such niceties are to be expected from such officials in their line of work, Kiondo, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, chooses to believe in the significance of their words. He has his reasons.

"I'm not normally superstitious but three good licks really remained on my mind," he says. What's more, when he explained to the immigration officer that he was destined for Idaho, a state which is not exactly famous for any glitz like California or New York but more for being racist, he felt he could hang on to the good wishes.

Moreover, he had no connections, and no money—well, just \$50. "I come from a very poor family in Kilimanjaro," he says. He had landed the trip to America purely by luck. And on landing in the US in 1994, he still was not sure that the scholarship he had traveled for would be his.

After several hours of copious research on US scholarships, he had finally found this one scholarship that was offered by the Kempna family of Corpus

Christi, Texas. It was for only a modest amount of money which came as a loan for students within the US. So he needed to be in the US if he was to stand any chance. A friend of Kiondo's however put him in touch with Jack Wilmo, an American living in Tanzania, now deceased, who agreed to guarantee Kiondo for this scholarship.

"Basically, I had nothing, but I was able to work very hard. I did the dishes, everything," says Kiondo. He was just 26 years old when he set foot in the US.

In New York in 1996, a year before Kiondo earned his self-sponsored degree in finance and management from the State University of New York in Binghamton, as he tried to plan his future path, rather than look for organisations where he could apply for a job, he looked at the range of business opportunities in the emerging markets (a financial market of a developing country).

He saw opportunities in the fact that the public and private sector environments in these countries, particularly in Tanzania, were undergoing rapid change to cope with the global competition. Some of these changes involved democratic reforms, public service reforms, liberalisation and privatisation of state-owned business in order to ensure economic survival in a globalised setting.

To Kiondo, a partnership between countries with developed economies and emerging nations offered the best chance for economic stability, good governance,



and ultimately better lives for local citizens. He therefore saw an urgent need to set up a consulting firm to provide emerging nations with access to international, broad-based assistance while maintaining local management and a strong local presence.

He felt he had a patriotic interest too in all of this. "The best hope for transitional economies is the growth of dedicated home-country experts who can lead the development efforts and I thought about that possibility as I put my company together," says Kiondo.

In a country where consultancy alone devours more than \$700m, all wired to blue chip firms abroad, Kiondo's concept of combining exotic skills blended with local initiatives made sense. A home-grown

knowledge business would not only save foreign exchange it would also contribute to the pool of indigenous professionals and possibly do its part in helping reverse Africa's brain-drain.

At the same time, he argues, a well-organised local operation means that monies generated one way or the other would flow directly into the local economy.

"My family and I have to live with the outcomes of our interventions," says Kiondo, who lives and works mostly in Dar es Salaam, where his children are being educated and groomed in the culture that raised him. "We have a special commitment to the long-term success of our engagements because our

clients have such a direct influence on the quality of our every-day life," says Kiondo.

Kilimanjaro member firms, all organised on this model of local management combined with appropriate international expertise, now operate in Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and Ethiopia. Kiondo says: "The knowledge business is our main engagement," he says. "We provide customised demand-driven solutions—affordable knowledge, skills, insights, methods, and technology designed to move client-organisations from their present state to their preferred future."

As he help his clients plan their future, he knows he has to think about the same thing for his own company as well. "All I want is just to keep this company growing," he says.

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