

Growing Up in a Kenyan Slum Taught Me the Real Value of Stuff

It was only after experiencing the abundance of stuff in the United States that Simon Okelo learned to value life with less, the way he grew up.

[Simon Okelo](#)

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¹ I grew up by the main road through Manyatta, the **slum** neighborhood of Kisumu, Kenya. My mother and other women from our community struggled to put food on their own tables. But they started a feeding program in our home for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, which was **rampant** in Kisumu in the 1990s. The program eventually became Young Generation Centre, an orphanage that still serves the community.

² My mother became a businesswoman to cover the household's expenses. She built a mud-walled building and rented rooms, dug a well to get water to sell, sold groceries, and supplied milk and bread to shopkeepers. Her many businesses ensured that we were all fed and clothed. There were no extras, but I never felt deprived, because we were surrounded by people who had very few possessions.

³ The **municipal** water supply to our area had been disconnected during road construction years ago. Most wells had water in the rainy season but dried up completely during droughts. That's when neighbors holding **jerry cans** lined up to our well, one of the few local sources of drinking water. Each family was limited to a 20-liter container, but we sometimes had to close the well for hours while it refilled. When that happened, those who had secured water earlier returned to share it with people stuck in line. Seeing people waiting for a well to refill taught me patience. Seeing them carefully sipping water showed me how to enjoy basic necessities as if they were gems.

A pair of brown shorts

⁴ When I was 13, I transferred to a private school, paying for my tuition by selling milk and other goods around Manyatta. I made two cents for each packet of milk, which meant I had to sell seven crates a day to pay the \$300 per term fee. I managed to sell 20 crates each morning, earning more than I needed for my own tuition, so my siblings were able to attend better schools as well.

⁵ On school assembly days, girls glowed in neat light-brown dresses, and boys stood at attention in long socks and chocolate-brown shorts. I was the only one who looked out of place, wearing the grey shorts that were the uniform of my previous school. I avoided walking in front of girls, as they giggled at the hole in the back of my shorts that displayed a sliver of my “full moon.”

⁶ One day my classmate Robert handed me a pair of brown shorts, an extra pair he had. I was so eager to try them on that I ran home, dashing between **pedestrians** and bicyclists. Drenched in sweat and excited to show off my new clothes, I jumped into the shorts and went to where my mom and the orphanage **matron** were making dinner.

⁷ “What do you think?” I asked.

⁸ They smiled, and had a close look. My mom said, “They look good on you, but if you work hard, you will get your own.” She didn’t want me to become **reliant** on charity. I walked away, disappointed and ashamed. Her words echoed in my mind that night as I lay in bed, trying to sleep.

⁹ The next day I gave the shorts back to Robert. I worked even harder selling milk, and I returned to school after the holidays with a new pair of brown shorts. I felt proud as I washed and pressed my new shorts every evening to wear the next day.

¹⁰ In 1994, when the World Cup was held in the United States, I was dangling on a neighbor’s window frame, watching the only TV in our neighborhood—an old black-and-white model. It was the first time I had seen the wealth of the United States. The beauty and **enormous** size of the stadiums and the amazing variety of foods shown during the commercial breaks made me aware of what we lacked.

¹¹ I took up boxing at 12 to help protect my sisters from the gangs that roamed our neighborhood. That skill earned me a college scholarship, a rare opportunity for a youth from Manyatta. At the end of my business studies in Nairobi, I returned to Kisumu to manage the orphanage, which cared for hundreds of kids by then. I organized music events and worked as a DJ on the side.

¹² Leading projects at the orphanage led to my next job as Africa field director for an international **NGO**. On a trip to Liberia in 2009, I met Rebecca, a young American woman working on a hospital project in Ghana. We spent six months evaluating the possibility of building health clinics in Liberia and Kenya. It took a little more time for us to evaluate the possibility of being together forever. We fell in love, and we were married in 2010.

An American consumer

¹³ We moved to the United States and spent our first year there in an affluent Seattle suburb, where I had to make big adjustments. I felt uncomfortable, especially when I went running at a local soccer field, which I thought was nicer than Kasarani, the home stadium of Kenya’s national soccer team. Most of the other people using the running track did not smile or wave when I greeted them.

¹⁴ I got a green card and a job as an over-the-phone medical interpreter. Rebecca and I bought a house. I was officially an American consumer.



Photo by [Dennis Siqueira](#) on [Unsplash](#)

¹⁵ Suddenly, I was earning what seemed to me a **vast** amount of money and living in a country where everything was **abundant** and **accessible**. On weekends I went to Costco to stock up on food and clothes. Anything that was on sale was **irresistible**. Even if I needed only one gallon of milk, I had to buy two, because Costco packed them in pairs. Where my neighbors in Manyatta had to wait long hours for water, I could choose between whole, 2-percent, skim, soy, and rice milk. But being in a place of such abundance destroyed my ability to

get satisfied. My consuming in America became propelled by the abundance of goods. I soon felt I was drowning in options.

¹⁶ The brown shorts I bought with the money I earned at 13 gave me joy and pleasure. I felt great as an older teenager in my only pair of tight, dark-blue jeans and my green-striped shirt. I had one pair of shoes, but they were uniquely mine, and every step in them gave me confidence. In Seattle the joy and confidence these clothes gave me were replaced by the daily chore of deciding what to wear from the many beautifully-colored shirts in my closet. I didn't feel connected to my clothes like I did when I had few to choose from and worked hard to get what I had.

¹⁷ I eventually realized that I had to adjust to my new ability to be a consumer.

Relearning “enough”

¹⁸ Visiting Manyatta every year and trying to find a balance between my two homes changed my **consumption** habits over time. These days, as I push the large cart through Costco, I imagine what people in Manyatta are experiencing at the moment I'm about to spend **excessively**.

¹⁹ Instead of being attracted by anything that is on sale, I find myself thinking how fortunate I am to be in a place where there are so many options. I also feel lucky that I am likely the only person from Manyatta in any Costco store in the world at that moment. Such reminders make me appreciate my purchases and use them **sparingly**, because I find joy in simplifying my lifestyle. I don't aim to match the living standards in Manyatta or to live up to the expectations of society in Seattle—I actively practice being **conscious** about my choices.

²⁰ Memories of my childhood help—like my neighbors enjoying a cup of water after a long wait, taking each sip as if it were the most delicious and expensive drink in the world. Like them, we could **savor** our possessions, share what we don't need, and take pleasure from others' enjoyment. Consuming just enough.

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