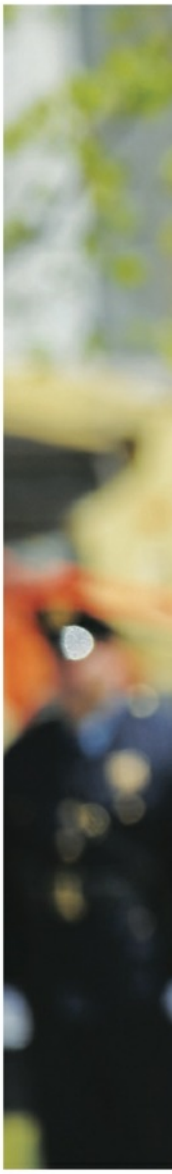
African-Americans are leaving the North and returning in record numbers to the American South, the region millions fled in the years after slavery in search of a life free of lynchings, free of the Ku Klux Klan, and free of "Jim Crow" segregation and economic discrimination. The reverse migration is primarily because of the promise of prosperity in the South, reports **Leslie Goffe.**

African-Americans moving South in droves



The incumbency of President Obama, pictured right, is an encouragement to those who believe a black nation can be established in the USA. "If we can get a black president, we can get a black nation," says one

Between 2000 and 2008, more than two million African-Americans left the North and the Midwest to move to the South, reversing the "Great Migration" which saw millions of blacks leave the South between 1910 and 1970.

After years of decline in its black population, the South is once again the region where the largest numbers of African-Americans live, according to recent statistics from the US census.

"The centre of population has moved in a southerly direction in the most extreme way we've ever seen in history", said the director of the US Census Bureau, Robert Groves.

The reason so many African-Americans are moving South now is because it is claimed there is a "New South", one in which blacks have been elected governors, mayors, and congressmen, and where blacks own multi-million dollar companies and are numbered among the South's wealthiest and most influential citizens.

Enticed by this "New South", which is exemplified in cities like Atlanta in Georgia, which is known as "the city too busy to hate", and is home to the Coca-Cola company, *CNN*, and other big businesses, African-Americans are eagerly fleeing declining cities in the North in a reverse migration to the South.

And though most of those moving South are doing so primarily because of the promise of prosperity there, and since the region has a much lower cost of living than does the North, it is also because many African-Americans see the South as the land of their ancestors and feel it is calling them home.

"Many African-Americans are in some ways Southerners at heart," says Isabel Wilkerson, author of the book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which traces the migration of blacks from the South to the North and back again. Wilkerson also traces her own family's journey from Georgia and South Carolina to Washington DC, and her visit to the South to discover the land her people left behind, but always spoke fondly of.

"There are lots of reunions going on right now, reunions with second cousins that people didn't know, and a return to the land that they had not really seen but had heard of from afar," Wilkerson says. "There is a culture connection that is going on as well as the economic imperative."

Michele Wood is one of the many young African-Americans leaving declining cities in the North and the Midwest for emerging cities in the South. Wood, a visual artist, packed up her belongings in April this year and left Indianapolis, the city in America's so-called "Rust Belt" where she was born and raised, for Atlanta in Georgia, the Southern state her family came from.

"I feel a kindred spirit to Georgia," says Wood, who published a book, *Going Back Home: An Artist Returns to the South*, which looks at African-American history in Georgia and the deep longing many blacks in the North have to return to their roots there.

"I'm going back because I love the state," says Wood, joyfully. "I love the people; love the lifestyle. My heart is in the South."

Republic of New Afrika

But years before Wood and hundreds of thousands of other African-Americans began packing up and leaving the North for the South, another group of African-

"There is a 'New South' in the US, where blacks have become governors, mayors and congressmen, and are numbered among the wealthiest citizens."

Americans had already headed back there themselves and begun calling for an exodus of black people southward.

In March 1968, during the Civil Rights period, a group of around 100 black nationalists gathered in Detroit, Michigan, in the American Midwest, to launch a movement to convince black Americans to return to the South to create an independent black nation, separate and apart from the United States of America.

This nation would, the activists decided, be called the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), and would be made up of Georgia; Mississippi; Alabama; Louisiana and South Carolina, the five Deep South states the great majority of the African-American population had called home.

Republic of New Afrika members, or citizens, are convinced that outsiders see them as crazy for believing the US government would ever agree to give up five of its 50 states to allow black people to create an independent nation. But stranger things have happened, says the RNA's minister of defence, General Rashid.

"If we can get a black president," the General, 74, says astutely, "we can get a black nation." Rashid, who is also the head of the RNA's paramilitary security unit, the Black Legion, points out too that the US government once created more than 50

self-governing all-black towns and villages after Emancipation in 1865. The black people who lived in all-black towns like Mound Bayou in Mississippi and Greenwood in Alabama were given the chance to live life on their own terms without fear of white discrimination or white violence, explains Rashid. Those all-black towns are a close facsimile of what the Republic of New Afrika hopes to create one day, says Rashid.

To begin the building of this black nation in 1968, a Republic of New Afrika constitution was drawn up and so was a "Declaration of Independence".

The "Black Declaration of Independence" reads, in part: "We, the Black People in America, in consequence of arriving at a knowledge of Ourselves as a people with dignity… in consequence of Our indistinguishable determination to go a different way, to build a new and better world, we do hereby declare Ourselves forever free and independent of the jurisdiction of the United States of America…"

A Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika, a "government-in-exile", was chosen, with a president, a vice president and ministers of agriculture, finance and culture and all the other offices of state. Several acres of land were purchased in Mississippi on which a "New Afrikan community" was to be established, as well. Scores of RNA members journeyed to Mississippi in the early 1970s to "consecrate" and "prepare the land" there. Among them was Fulani Sunni-Ali, 63, a former RNA minister of information who left New York to settle in Georgia in the 1980s.

"There was no other subjugated nation in the Black Diaspora calling for separation and using terms our people had never even contemplated like 'sovereignty' and 'independence'," says Sunni-Ali, who has just finished writing a book about her experiences in the black movement, which saw her in prison at one point and on the run as a fugitive at another.

"I definitely believe because of the impact we had in the 60s and 70s, our people, who hadn't thought about it before, began to look at the South differently."

"Come to the Land!", read Republic of New Afrika leaflets from the 1970s imploring African-Americans in the North to join the citizens of the RNA in the South.

But when the RNA tried purchasing 20 acres of land in Mississippi, the authorities there, at first, blocked the sale and in an effort to discourage the nation's members from settling in the state, Mississippi police arrested and briefly jailed the RNA officials.

The RNA was, eventually, able to purchase several acres of land in Mississippi, on which they were able to build a headquarters. But despite the RNA's best efforts, only a few people came from the North to join them on the land.

It was to be expected. After all, African-Americans in the 1970s were still fleeing an "Old South" where jazz singer Billie Holiday said in her song "Strange Fruit", "black bodies" swing "in the southern breeze" from Southern trees which had "blood on the leaves and blood at the root."

Despite this ugly history, the Republic of New Afrika members such as Ahmed Obafemi, 72, who moved from Ohio to Alabama, see the South as their ancestral home and a Promised Land. He says people have encouraged him to go back to Africa rather than fight to establish a new Africa in America. He rejects this.

"We have some blood, sweat and tears here," says Obafemi, a little exasperated. "My mother, father, grandparents, great grandparents, invested something in this soil and we can't just give up our struggle by getting on a ship, a boat or a plane." African-Americans cannot, he says, "just run away."

But some RNA members are looking further afield than the American South. Fulani Sunni-Ali, a broadcaster and a writer, purchased land recently in Belize, in Central America, that she says could one day serve as a settlement abroad for citizens of the RNA. Sunni-Ali lives part of the year in Georgia and part in Belize, which she was attracted to because so many of its people are descended, like African-Americans, from enslaved Africans. Her international experience has shown her, she says, that the RNA's objectives need to be amended.

"The five states in the South is a limited objective and cannot be our goal," Sunni-Ali says. "We should continue that struggle but make it broader to include subjugated people in the African Diaspora everywhere."

While some are looking abroad, others like Chokwe Lumumba, a human rights attorney and a former vice president of the RNA, have their eyes on the political prize at home in the South. Lumumba is among those in the RNA who ventured early into the Deep South, to Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1970s when it was still very dangerous for a black person to do so. He sold his house and gave up his job in Detroit, Michigan, for a new life in what he calls, proudly, "New Afrikan Liberated Territories" in the South.

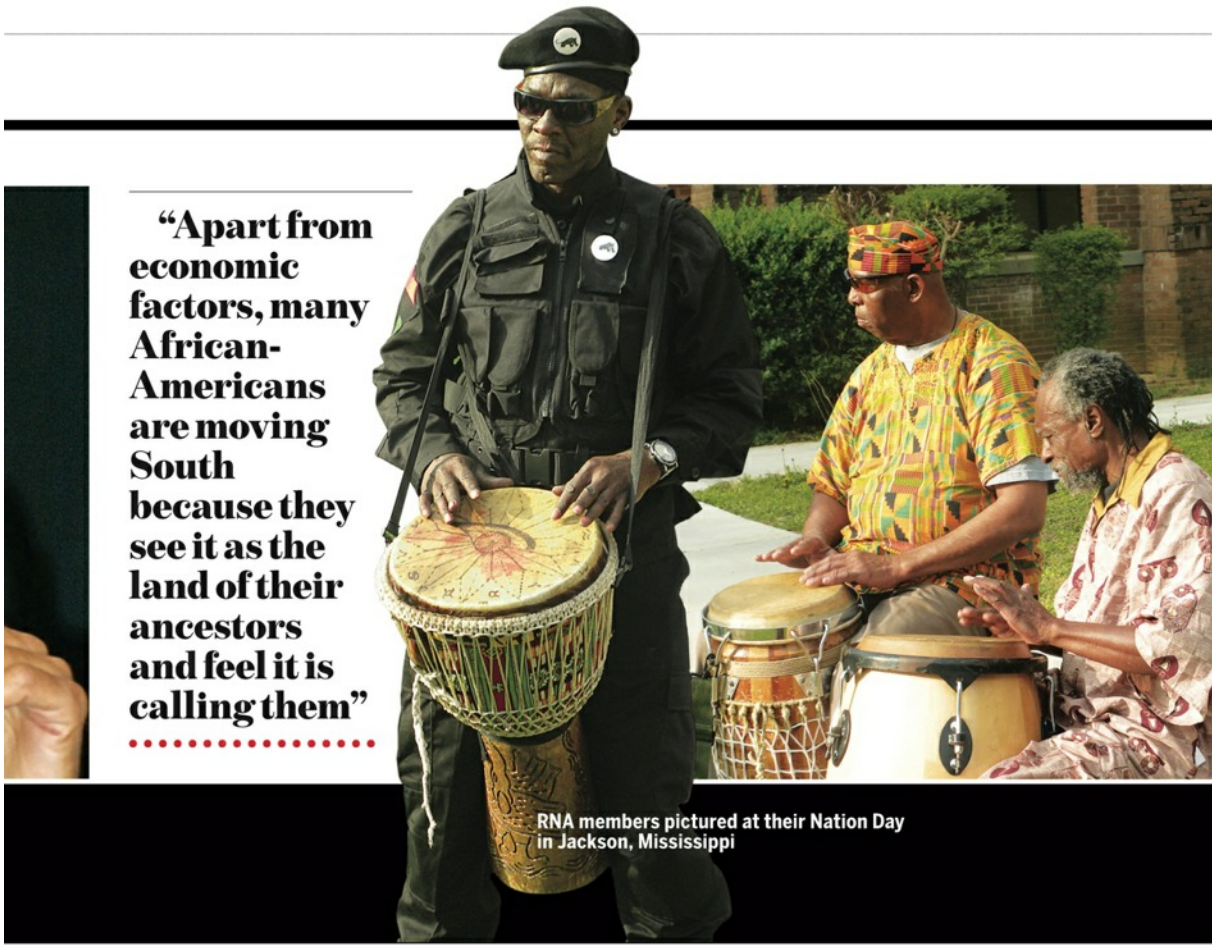
Chokwe Lumumba, an activist for the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), a movement launched to create an independent black nation in the South

He also gave up his so-called "slave name" and took instead the name "Chokwe" in honour of a Southern African ethnic group and the name Lumumba in honour of the former Congolese prime minister and pan-Africanist, Patrice Lumumba.

Chokwe Lumumba says despite its dark past, black people must return to the South in their millions if they want to have real black power.

"We feel that strategically, geographically and demographically these are the best places to be in order to build black power in our time," says Lumumba, who is a city councilman in Jackson, a city once notorious for its lynchings of blacks and for the murder of the black Civil Rights leader, Medgar Evers, by a white suprema-

"Apart from economic factors, many African-Americans are moving South because they see it as the land of their ancestors and feel it is calling them"



RNA members pictured at their Nation Day in Jackson, Mississippi

cist in 1963.

"This is," Lumumba says, proudly, "the historical 'Black Belt' where we first came and we have a great claim to this area."

Chokwe Lumumba is committed to the RNA objectives of creating a black nation in the South. But while he waits for this to occur, he is determined in the meantime to lay claim to the South by encouraging African-Americans, who outnumber whites in many districts and counties there, to press their numerical advantage by voting for and filling elected offices with black politicians sympathetic to black interests there.

Lumumba cites as an example the extraordinary "Reconstruction" period in the South after Emancipation when blacks were able to use their superior numbers there to elect to public office more than 1,500 black governors, senators, mayors, congressmen and other officials.

"What we are trying to do is to create power in places where we are in the majority and eventually to have enough strength to have state power, political and economically," explains Lumumba, who won his City Council election in Jackson with a solid bloc of black votes, from both native sons and those who had recently migrated from the North. Though participating in the American electoral system was not part of the RNA's original plan, many of its members, or citizens, agree it is the most effective way available to achieve the kind of black power they hope for. General Rashid, the RNA's minister of defence, like Chokwe Lumumba, says better the ballot than the bullet. "If whites won't free the land," says Rashid, angrily, "then we will take it by outnumbering them and then voting them out and then running them out when we have enough people in enough places.

"We need senators and councilmen," he says. "That's how we are going to bring change; not through shoot-outs."

In other words, if the RNA is to increase its sparse membership, it needs to grow up, mature, and broaden its appeal. In the past, the RNA's reputation as a militant organisation not afraid to stand up to the authorities won it many members. Today, in much more conservative times, this is more likely to lose them fresh recruits like Faith Jackson, a 20-year-old pre-law student who, after attending an RNA event on the campus of her black university in Jackson, Tougaloo College, is considering joining them. Faith was attracted by what the RNA had to say about living a natural life, being knowledgeable about black history and being active in social and political movements. She is not sure what to make of the call for a separate nation, though.

"I sympathise and understand but I find it hard to comprehend how the RNA will be able to acquire this land," says Faith, apologetically. "I just don't see the USA handing it over. I sympathise with why they want it to happen."

Whatever happens, it's clear the Republic of New Afrika, a small organisation with only a few hundred members, has had a big influence on black identity in the USA.

The RNA can, rightly, take some credit for being among the first African-Americans to recognise that the future for blacks in America would likely be in the South, where their past also is. ■NA