

RESEARCH REPORT

The African Immigrant Folklife Study Project

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AFRICAN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN THE WASHINGTON, D.C.,

METROPOLITAN AREA: A BRIEF PROFILE

New African communities have emerged in the United States since the mid-1960s, joining older African-American populations in several urban centers including the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Each of these communities comes together for social and symbolic events that help their members to define and maintain their sense of identity and tradition. Senegalese organize celebrations and traditional wrestling matches at local parks, and invite friends to share barbecued lamb on the Muslim holiday of Tabaski. Over A.M. radio, communities whose members originate in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopians, Eritreans, Somalians, and Sudanese) broadcast narrative poetry in traditional form expressing their perspectives about exile in America. Ghanaians of the Ashanti ethnic group appoint local leaders — an Asantehene and Queen Mother of Washington, D.C. — with the ceremony and regalia of the Akan tradition in Ghana. Nigerians establish houses of worship in the city which are branches of religious institutions back home.

While these communities have grown in size and visibility in the urban landscape of metropolitan Washington, the diversity and richness of their cultures remain largely invisible to most local residents. Figures available from the 1990 census place the overall number of African-born residents of the Washington area at 36,327, out of a total U.S. African-born population of 363,819. Informal estimates indicate that the Washington and national figures are much too low. While many recent African immigrant communities share some social characteristics with each other, with others of the African diaspora, and with immigrant groups in general, they also vary considerably in size, in the length of time they have been in the United States, and in the circumstances that brought them to this country. Some individuals came with scholarships to American universities; others fled oppressive political

situations with “only the shirt on their backs,” as one Ethiopian educator/cab driver explains.

African newcomers to the United States include those who consider their residence temporary and plan to return to live in their countries of origin at a later date. Many actively move between residences on the African and North American continents. Some have chosen to reside permanently in the United States but still find it important to teach their children everything they need to know to maintain ties with relatives in Africa, if only for brief visits “home.” As Remi Aluko, founder of a summer camp that teaches children about African culture, says of her own children, “I started teaching them and talking to them right from when they were babies, and I saw it worked.” When she brought her children to visit Nigeria in 1990, “it was tremendous. When they would go to the people they would understand the language. They could eat the food. Everybody felt as if these kids had been part of them.”

In the process of building community life in the United States, African-born immigrants in America are creating new and unique forms of expressive culture patterned after but not identical to African forms; they actively and explicitly use the *language* of tradition — ways of cooking food, of dressing, of dancing — to define themselves as Africans, in the context of the United States, to each other and to the world. At the same time, however, because of more reliable telephone communications, frequent and less expensive flights, and accessible home audio and video recording, it has become easier to maintain a closer connection with family and friends at home. Just as the expressive culture of African-born residents of Washington, D.C., receives constant new infusions through visitors from home and from their own trips to the continent, popular and grassroots culture in Africa are influenced by new music, language, and goods from America.

Fieldwork during the past year has hinted at the richness of the material available: from Ghanaian drumming to Zairian *soukous* music; from Nigerian Jollof rice to Ethiopian coffee

Preceding page: At a Nigerian naming ceremony in Washington, D.C., the newborn is introduced by his family to the world. On the table for him to taste are a variety of foods — bitter, sweet, salty, bland, and peppery — symbolizing the varying experiences of life.

The African Immigrant Folklife Study Project began in the spring of 1994 with a 12-week training program of community scholars from the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. This year, the project presents two evening concerts, a film series in conjunction with the National Museum of African Art, and an exhibition of photographs from the fieldwork completed thus far. It is hoped that a full Festival program will be presented in 1997. The following research report discusses some of the issues raised during the project and presents some of the preliminary fieldwork findings.

Senegalese members of the Mouride brotherhood prepare *theiboudienne*, a savory dish of fish, stewed vegetables, and flavored rice in preparation for the annual visit to the Washington, D.C., area of Serigne Cheikh M'Backe, the spiritual leader of this Senegal-based Sufi Muslim community.



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ceremonies; from Senegalese hairbraiding to Somali women's songs; from South African poetry of invocation to personal experience stories of immigrants' first encounters with American culture.

THE AFRICAN IMMIGRANT FOLKLIFE STUDY GROUP: A PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITY SCHOLARS

The idea to incorporate research on African immigrant communities into a Festival program began with the enthusiastic response of Senegalese and Gambian immigrants in the Washington and New York City areas to their involvement in planning special events at the 1990 Festival Senegal program. Anna Ceesay, a fabric resist artist from the Gambia, wrote of her reasons for participating in the project: "As Africans we are faced with prejudice and unfair treatment in our everyday immigrant life. This is due to ignorance and lack of understanding. This project will...give us opportunities to reveal and teach something of our traditional ways of life, our culture and therefore make more people know and understand us better."

In the past, much of the formal study and documentation of culture and of traditional

folklife has been considered the professional domain of anthropologists, folklorists, and other formally trained specialists usually from outside of the communities that have been studied. Recent work in reflexive anthropology and folklore has stressed the importance of the perspectives of culture bearers and of acknowledging the orientations researchers carry with them into the field. The development of this ethical knowledge coincides with cultural communities' increasingly asserted right to be agents of their own cultural representation and explication rather than merely objects of study. The African Immigrant Folklife Study Project was conceived as community-centered research. Such research places the tools and methods of research and public presentation in the hands of those whose communities are represented. The researchers within the communities displayed a strong commitment to and passion for the collection and preservation of culture.

A 12-session training program began in the spring of 1994 with 16 community scholars located through recommendations from established scholars at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art, the Anacostia Museum, and other sources. Our



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research/curatorial team included Africans born in Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Africa. The team members were skilled in traditional dressmaking, resist dyeing, and hairbraiding. They were college professors, clergy, artists, graduate students, and cooks, as well as researchers and community organizers. In the group were Christians, Muslims, people affiliated to other African religious traditions, and people from the same nation-state but with different regional and ethnic affiliations.

A unitary "African immigrant community" does not exist as such; therefore, from the very beginning, the group was challenged to find ways to use the boundaries insiders used. However, we found that describing people by geographical nation-state of origin could be problematic. For example, the boundaries of Ethiopia have been a hotly contested issue for those who identify themselves as Oromo, and who consider themselves to be part of a separate country.

When we tried looking at ethnic groups within African countries as the primary unit of study, we found that religious affiliation united some people living here across ethnic, geographical, and political boundaries while

dividing others of similar language and geographical origin. The group decided to assign responsibility by region for contacting African immigrant community organizations but to focus on exploring their own self-identified communities in depth — those whose members shared common knowledge, values, and interacted with each other on a regular basis.

Members of the group noted that the term "African immigrant" could refer to people born on the continent who have recently taken up residence abroad, but it could also refer to historical communities of Africans. Many African Americans whose ancestors were forced to emigrate from Africa centuries ago experienced their own migration from the fields of the lower South to the factories of the urban North during the 1930s and 1940s. (The odyssey is described in the exhibition and accompanying publication, *Field to Factory*, at the National Museum of American History.) Others of African descent have come to the United States via the Caribbean and South America. Both groups and their descendants living in the Washington area are often the neighbors, clients, patrons, and co-congregants of African newcomers to the area.

Some in the group argued that the word

Although outsiders may envision Ethiopians as a single community in the D.C. area, the many varieties of *injira* bread that Rahel Mekuria carries in her store, Addisu Gebeya, serve as a metaphor for the many regional, language, and ethnic communities from Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa residing here.

The 18th Street corridor is home to many businesses founded by immigrant Africans. Restaurants, hairbraiding salons, clothing stores, and groceries utilize occupational knowledge and skills developed in Africa, and provide a showcase for African immigrant artistry and business acumen. Many of them function as information exchange centers, and each is a community institution and landmark. The Meskerem Restaurant, for example, serves as a popular eating place for the general public and a center for activities for Ethiopians.



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"immigrant" implies voluntary separation from one's country of origin; or that it does not account for Africans in this country as refugees; or that it implies a permanency of residence that precludes the eventual return many people hope for; or that it does not describe the conditions of dual residence and transnationality which more precisely define the contemporary experience of many Africans here.

Reflecting upon his personal process of rethinking cultural identity as a result of his experience in the United States, filmmaker and community scholar Olaniyi Areke comments:

Being an African was not a big thing when I was in Nigeria. I never knew the importance of my culture until I came here. I used to think the cultures of other ethnic groups in Nigeria and other African countries were different. I know now that there are more similarities than differences. My community is not limited to Yoruba, Nigeria, and Africa: the whole world is now my community since African people are all over the world.

Like other recent African-born immigrants, Areke faced, and continues to con-

front, the choices and challenges of constructing a new identity — naming himself in relation to others in the new social world of the United States.

WORK IN PROGRESS: SAMPLES OF PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

The following reports represent a small portion of the materials gathered during fieldwork for the project. Since, in this project, the background of the fieldworker is as interesting and important to the research as the interviews he or she carries out, a thumbnail sketch of this information is included as well.

Aristides Pereira credits his lifelong interest in cultural diversity to experiences in his old neighborhood of Santhiaba in the southern region of Senegal, West Africa. "Playing with my pals of my age group, I learned not only their languages (Diola, Mandinka, a little Manjack) but also their culture.... By seeking information about them, by studying them every day, I found myself as a strong part of my community." Aristides has been teaching about African cultures at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center for the past 15 years.

Aristides, a musician himself, interviewed Senegalese *kora* musician, oral historian, and 15-year Washington resident Djimo Kouyate.

Kouyate is a Mandinka *jali* (also called a *griot*) — the 149th *jali* in his family and a descendant of the first *griot* and diplomat to the 13th-century king of the Mali Empire, Kankon Moussa. In his interview Djimo Kouyate noted, “A *griot* is first an educator, an oral historian; the entertainment part [of *kora* playing] comes way after the educational aspect of a real *griot*.” Aristides locates Kouyate “at the center of many activities in [Washington’s] African community, such as baptisms, religious holidays, and weddings.” Kouyate lectures at schools and universities about different aspects of Mandinka history and culture; he also has a traditional dance studio where people learn Senegalese dances.

Nomvula Mashoai Cook is from Lesotho, though she happened to be born across the border in South Africa. She recalls that growing up in Lesotho she enjoyed traditional dancing and singing in her neighborhood.

She arrived in the United States in 1981 and soon found herself “swimming in the belly of a new culture,” overcome with the fear of losing her native culture. She began actively collecting and preserving the music and art of her Basotho ethnic group. She also gathers Africans and African Americans at her house every year for an “African marketplace” featuring food, music, and dancing, creating a dialogue between cultures.

Interviewing a number of South Africans for her research, Nomvula noted that many are making plans to return now that the yoke of apartheid and repression has lifted in South Africa. Many have had a long, harsh exile. Nomvula interviewed South African poet Mphela Makhoba, whose work was an intrinsic part of the culture of struggle against apartheid. His performance of poetry grows out of the Mosotho tradition of ritual invocation. Self-exiled from South Africa in the 1960s, Makhoba came to the United States to continue his art and protest.

Veronica Abu, who by profession is a private nurse, is considered an excellent cook in the Ghanaian community. She used herself as a resource, as well as interviewing four other cooks with roots in various parts of Ghana.

She described the preparation of *fufu*, a staple dish in Ghana, both here and there:

In Ghana, one has to boil the raw plain-tain and cassava or yam till it’s well cooked. Then...pound it with pestle and mortar till it becomes smooth and soft. This takes about two or three hours.... Preparing *fufu* here is very easy and fast. The *fufu* is made in a powder form and is made into a dough by mixing it with water.

Dr. Tonye Victor Erekosima is from the Kalabari region of Nigeria and grew up among Igbo neighbors in the southeastern region of the country. From an early age, he was torn between the complex worlds created by colonial Nigeria: that of his Western-educated, middle-class parents, members of a Protestant sect; that of the Catholic and Anglican schools he attended; frustratingly isolated from his ancestral culture. He accepted a scholarship in the early 1960s to study in the United States, eventually obtaining his doctorate. A personal interest in textiles and men’s dress in the Kalabari region has resulted in several publications and an extensive collection of photographs. He is also a minister at the Church of the Living God in Hyattsville, a pan-African and African-American congregation.

As part of his fieldwork, Dr. Erekosima interviewed members of the River States Forum, an organization of Nigerian immigrants from the Niger Delta area, Dr. Erekosima’s ancestral home. During their third annual dinner banquet in November, men from the group danced a traditional masquerade, which included a hand-carved shark mask crafted by one of the members living in Maryland. The tradition has changed in the new setting, of course: “more economical” pre-recorded music is used instead of live musicians, and the masquerade performer is much younger and better educated than the elders who dance back in Nigeria.

Dagnewchew “Dany” Abebe grew up in the multiethnic town of Nazareth, Ethiopia. His interest in music began when he was an elementary-school child singing sacred songs in religious classes. He studied in Germany,

where he supported himself by playing international music, and then studied music industry management in New York City, finally settling in Washington, where he assists Ethiopian and other African music and cultural groups plan events.

During his research, Dany visited several Ethiopian markets, which carry not only foods, condiments, and cooking implements used by community members, but also an Ethiopian cookbook, a monthly publication called the *Ethiopian Review*, audio and video recordings of Ethiopian artists, and even Ethiopian-alphabet computer software. He interviewed Rahel Mekuria, owner and manager of the Addisu Gebeya (New Market). In addition to supplying the community with Ethiopian goods, Rahel performs traditional coffee ceremonies. The ceremony is described as "more of a social gathering among guests and neighbors to discuss what is going on in and around the community than just the normal coffee break." The ritual includes roasting, grinding, and boiling the coffee "to perfection," while incense is burning and a toast-barley snack is offered to guests.

RESEARCH AND CULTURAL WORK

The African Immigrant Folklife community scholars have told us that participation in the study has enhanced their awareness and cohesiveness as cultural educators and community workers. They would like to continue to develop projects above and beyond the Festival program such as educational programs in many venues around the Washington area. We will lend technical assistance as the group continues its work toward the 1997 Festival and related activities.

The African Immigrant Study Group hopes that the activities at this year's Festival as well as the full program in 1997 will make their cultures more accessible and more valued as an important part of the Washington area's cultural heritage.

DIANA BAIRD N'DIAYE
conceived and directs
the African Immigrant
Folklife Study Project.
She curated Festival
of American Folklife
programs on
traditions of Senegal
in 1990, Maroon
culture in 1992 (with
Kenneth Bilby), and on
children's play and
performance traditions
of metropolitan
Washington in 1993.

BETTY BELANUS
is the Education
Specialist for the
African Immigrant
Folklife Study Project.
She has developed
educational seminars
and materials for
teachers. She curated
Festival programs on
Massachusetts
(1989) and the Family
Farm (1991).

Suggested Readings

- Baird N'Diaye, Diana. 1990. Tradition and Cultural Identity in Senegal. In *Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife Program Book*, ed. Peter Seitel. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, p. 38-47.
- Bryce-Laporte, Roy, ed. 1980. *Sourcebook on the New Immigration*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Eicher, J.B., and Tonye Victor Erekosima. 1987. Kalabari Funerals: Celebration and Display. *African Arts* 21(1).
- Frosh-Schroder, Joan. 1994. Re-Creating Cultural Memory: The Notion of Tradition in Ghanaian-American Performance. *UCLA Journal of Dance Ethnology* 18:17-23.
- _____. 1991. Things of Significance Do Not Vanish: Dance and the Transmission of Culture in the Ghanaian Community. *UCLA Journal of Dance Ethnology* 15:54-67.
- Lamphere, Louise, ed. 1992. *Structuring Diversity: Ethnographic Perspectives on the New Immigration*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Lemma, Tesfaye. 1991. *Ethiopian Musical Instruments*. Washington, D.C.: Howard Copy.
- Ofori-Ansa, Paul. 1979. *Children's Games and a Folktale from African Tradition*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Stern, Stephen, and John Allan Cicala, eds. 1991. *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life*. Logan: Utah State University.

Suggested Listening

- Kouyate, Djimo. 1990. *Djimo Kouyate and Mamaya African Jazz*.

Suggested Viewing

- These films will be shown at a special film event, "Journey: Films about African Emigrants," on July 1st at the S. Dillon Ripley Auditorium, Smithsonian Institution. The event is cosponsored by the National Museum of African Art.*
- La Noire de* (Black girl). Ousmane Sembene, 1965. 60 mins. B/W.
- Descendants*. Olaniyi Areke, 1987. 15 mins. B/W.
- Disillusion*. Olaniyi Areke, 1991. 110 mins. Color.
- In and Out of Africa*. Elisa Barbash, Lucien Taylor, Christopher Steiner, Gabai Baré, 1992. 59 mins. Color.