

African Immigrant Culture in Metropolitan Washington, D.C.: Building & Bridging Communities

Diana Baird N'Diaye

self living in the Washington, D.C., area for an indefinite period. Here she uses her intimate knowledge and talents in *buraanbur* and other expressive arts to do the delicate work of repairing torn relations between Somalis from different families, drawing people together across clan lines. As Somali community scholar Abdirahman Dahir observes, "*Buraanbur* brings harmony to the community; it brings participation of women from all the clans." Rukia Hussein and other Somali women in Northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., share the task of organizing occasions that ease the pain of adjusting to a new environment, restore relations, and construct community identity. Through their efforts, Somali women's poetry, once restricted to women's circles, has become a source of pride, enjoyment, and solidarity for all Somali immigrants.

Across the metropolitan Washington region, African immigrants actively redefine their ideas of tradition and community by creating institutions and events that draw on expressive African forms. African-born area residents establish language and culture schools where their American-born children learn the social and artistic skills of their ancestral homes. Family and friends come together to celebrate births, weddings, and other rites of passage. African immigrant entrepreneurs employ their knowledge of personal adornment and of the social needs of their home communities to serve fellow immigrants and other Washingtonians.

As did the collaborative research project that led to the 1997 Festival of American Folklife program *African Immigrant Folklife*, this essay explores several cultural dimen-

In Somalia, Rukia Hussein grew up surrounded by the bounteous expression of *buraanbur*, a tradition of women's sung poetry and dance. In the 1960s, she was a leader with her husband in the Somali struggle for independence. She served as a diplomat during the transition to Somali independence. Mrs. Hussein is recognized by fellow Somalis as a fine poet. When the war in her country tore apart the rich fabric of cultural and social life at home, she found her-

sions: the use made of knowledge, skills, values, and expressive forms brought from home to construct new communities and identities; and the new tradition that grows from encounters with groups in the African Diaspora and in American society as a whole that contributes to the rich cultural landscape of the United States.

The Washington, D.C., region has one of the largest and most diverse populations in the United States of immigrants born on the African continent, some 60,000 people. According to Bereket Selassie, "The majority have come from the Horn of Africa, more than 30,000 Ethiopians, Eritreans, and Somalis combined, with the largest numbers from Ethiopia and Eritrea. The next largest group, 10,000 to 15,000, are from Nigeria. Substantial numbers from Ghana, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Cameroon, and dozens of other African countries add to the mix of African cultures" (Selassie 1996). They are students, workers, self-employed business people, and their families. Selassie notes that a large number of African immigrants in Washington have come as political refugees. The nation's capital also is home to African diplomats and professionals serving in embassies, international and nongovernmental organizations, and at academic institutions.

The years from 1965 to the present can be considered the third and fourth waves of African immigration. The first was involuntary, of course, the result of violent sequestrations in Africa between the 17th and the 19th centuries. The next wave of immigration from Africa was approximately 150 years ago from Cape Verde and was driven by severe conditions of drought on these islands off the West African coast.

Prior to 1965, most Africans tended to emigrate to the European metropolises which had colonized their lands. In 1965, however, new immigration legislation was enacted in the United States which eliminated the system of national quotas for the Western hemisphere and replaced it with an overall limit of 120,000 immigrants. In 1986 amnesty laws enabled many long-term African residents to regularize their status. But now in 1997, debates recalling those of the 1920s dispute the value or threat of immigration. Proposed immigration legislation is increasingly restrictive.

Neighbors, clients, patrons, and co-congregants of African newcomers living in the Washington area often include African Americans — the descendants of those who were brought unwillingly from Africa centuries ago, some of whose families migrated from the lower South during the 1930s and 1940s and others who came via the Caribbean

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(above) Members of Ethiopian Christian communities of several denominations celebrate Maskal (cross finding) each year at Malcolm X Park in Washington, D.C. Maskal, a tradition of Coptic origin, commemorates the finding of the cross and announces the new year.

Photo by Harold Dorwin

and South America. Some long-term local residents and their organizations have welcomed Africans of the new diaspora to their churches and community organizations. Other area residents have been slow to embrace newcomers to neighborhoods they see as their own. Many African immigrants, like their counterparts from the Caribbean, encounter the dilemma of being projected in the media as model minorities while paradoxically facing challenges arising from anti-immigrant sentiment and resurgent racism.

Culture shock or disillusion, concern over the possible loss of culture, and the desire to communicate their community traditions to a wider public often go hand in hand. Women particularly note the need for children to learn the traditions of their parents' homeland as part of a good upbringing.

Nomvula Cook, born in Lesotho, came to the United States with her African-American husband:

In 1981 I arrive in the United States. Little do I know that this becomes a turning point in my life. I meet new people, and I make new friends. It doesn't take me long to realize that I am now swimming in the belly of a new culture. The question is, do I swim or do I sink? I begin to feel the burden of being expected to think and rationalize like an American.... The fear of losing my culture and tradition in a



(above) Somali women dance to the words and clap to the rhythms of buraanbur at a picnic in Northern Virginia organized by the Washington-area Somali community. Photo by Harold Dorwin



(above) As Texas-born Jackie Kakembo looks on, Don Folden, also an African American, is adorned in traditional clothing by Cameroonian artists Paul Kengmo and Joseph Ngwa at a cultural evening. The educational event was organized by the clothing and home design store African Eye along with the Palaver Hut, a group founded by Liberian and other African women in Washington, D.C., that helps to make links between communities. Photo by Harold Dorwin

foreign country continues to stay with me.... I begin to feel a tremendous guilt of raising my children in a culture that has no room to accommodate my cultural identity. At this point ... maybe this fear begins to motivate me to be actively involved in collecting, preserving the cultural music and art of Basotho people....

African newcomers to the United States describe a development of consciousness of themselves as members of an ethnic group, of a larger national community, of Africa as a whole, and ultimately of a larger African world that includes African-American and Caribbean peoples. They

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Buraanbur Poetry

By Rukia Hussein, trans. Abdirahman Dahir

The following poem in the original Somali and in English translation is representative of *buraanbur*, a women's praise poetry and dance tradition that is carried on by the Somali community in the Washington, D.C., area.

"Hooya Amaanaysa Gabadheeda"

(A Mother Praises Her Beloved Daughter)

Gabadhii aan jeclaayee galaddii Ilaahayee
Gacalkii la i siiyee ee guule ii gartaay
Gaban markii aad ahayd ee laagu gardaadsanaa
Gurbood markaad noqotay ubadkii ka raacaay gees
Dugsigana aad aaday guushiina soo hantiday
Garaadkaaga iyo aqoontaada gees walbab gaasir ma leh
Markii aan gaabshay tii ii gargaartayee
Oo guulahaan tuugay rabbigayga gacanta wayn
Giddigeeda noloshaada ha ahaato garabka sare
OO guur marka aad gaarto oo wiil is-gacashataan
Ninka ha guul gullin guryankaaga yaan la maqal
Gurboodka ururi gacalkiisa gogol u fidi
Go'yaasha u uumi oo raaxo heer ka gaar
Oo gurrac haddii aad aragto gurigiisaba uga guur
Gunaanadka iga guddoon gaamur duco gin-giman
Golaha aakhirana jannadii ku hayso gogol

My beloved girl, you are a gift from Allah.
You are sweet, bestowed on me by the Victorious One.
When you were a baby and were held on a lap,
When you became an adolescent and took your place among your peers,
And went to school and claimed success,
Your intellect and knowledge rounded in every way,
You helped me when I lagged behind,
So I pray Allah the Omnipotent on your behalf.
May your life be lived at the highest level
When you begin to date and are ready for marriage.
Do not nag him, and let not your grumbling be heard;
Open your house and spread mats for his people.
Apply incense at home, and dress and indulge him with pleasure,
But if he rewards you with mischief, move out from his home.
Accept this conclusion of my bestowing prayers to you:
I wish you paradise in the life hereafter.

Abdirahman Dahir has been working as a community scholar for the African Immigrant Folklife Study Project since 1994. He is a Training Coordinator for Lutheran Social Services and a great admirer of traditional Somali poetry.

perform these evolving identities through participation in various cultural activities.

For many African newcomers to the United States, their sojourn is temporary; they plan to return to their countries at a later date. Others have decided to live permanently in the United States by becoming American citizens. This decision is not taken lightly and without sacrifice. Yusef Ford, associate director of the Ethiopian Community Center, notes that in becoming an American citizen — a move that he hesitated to make for two decades in the United States — he was obliged to forfeit rights to his father's inheritance in Ethiopia.

A few Africans are able to move between residences on the African and North American continents. Following a Caribbean pattern, some African countries are beginning to permit continued citizenship to emigrants and are even establishing ministries of emigrant affairs. Whether Africans are permanent residents, citizens, or temporary sojourners, they often have the responsibility of sending support to families at home.

As the continental Africans living in the nation's capital region have increased in number, they have stamped their presence on the ethnic map and cultural calendar of the area. Africans present cultural programs, conferences, and forums about their communities. Akwa Ibom, for example, an organization composed of members from Nigeria's Cross Rivers State, presents dance and masquerade traditions representing the Efik, Anang, and Ibibio ethnic groups of that region. Some organizations like the Ghanaian group Fantse-Kuo and the Sudanese Association organize by country, region, or ethnic group. Other groups present traditional culture from a pan-African perspective.

Using traditional skills and knowledge, African-born entrepreneurs develop services for immigrants and the community at large: Nigerian-run Oyingbo International Market in Hyattsville, Maryland, is an example, as are tailors, dressmakers, couturiers, textile shops, and hair-braiding salons. Immigrants run weekend schools and camps to nurture cultural identity and transmit traditions to their children. African journalists, talk-show hosts, and disc jockeys feature news, interviews, music, and discussions of interest to the African immigrant community.

Events such as the annual Ethiopian soccer tournament, institutions such as the AME Methodist Church African Liberation Ministry, and "friends" and "sister cities" organizations bring together different communities in the Washington area. Community institutions sometimes use tradi-

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tional forms of social organization like *tontines* — revolving credit and savings societies — other kinds of investment groups, and town associations to get things done.

Some organizations retain close links to embassies, and their programs often center around events in the home country. But many others exist outside the sphere of official contact with their former lands. As communities become more established and populous, organizations become more like those of other American ethnic groups. Community scholar Gorgui N'Diaye notes that twenty years ago, children born to Senegalese parents in the United States were usually sent home to be educated, with the expectation that the entire family would eventually return. At that time, they felt no need for cultural training outside the family. As more Senegalese and their Gambian neighbors have begun to raise their children here, Senegambians have begun to explore organized cultural activities for their young growing up in America.

African immigrants bring to America ideas of ethnic and region-based organizations that were devised when Africans first migrated from rural towns to urban centers in Africa. These patterns of organization continue in the United States. In the greater Washington metropolitan area, the Nwan-nedinamba Social Club of Nigeria, the Asante Kotoko Association, and the Ethiopian Business Association are among the many organizations that revitalize traditional norms, values, and civic unity (Olumba 1995).

Political, social, and cultural bridges are gradually being built between continental African and Caribbean communities, who share similar experiences of immigration, accommodation, and ongoing transnational interests. They recognize an identity based on shared African ancestry and the experience of racial discrimination. This growing consciousness is shared with established African-American communities. These relationships have led Washington's Mayor Marion Barry to appoint a Commission of African and Caribbean Community Affairs, which is composed of equal numbers of continental African and Caribbean Americans. African-American organizations have formed "sister city" relationships with cities in Africa and the Caribbean. These organizations develop exchange visits between African and American children and adults, sponsor cultural activities, and raise funds for civic gifts — ambulances, computers, etc. The organizations work closely with African and Caribbean immigrant organizations from their "adopted" regions.

As African expatriates become immigrants, and as immigrants become citizens, they use aspects of traditional culture to maintain connections with their roots, affirm their

identity, maintain positive self-images for their children, express their links to other African world people, and assert their unique contribution to their land of adoption.

There is a need for greater understanding of the cultures and experiences of continental Africans living in the United States. Perhaps a continuing annual event, like Brooklyn's West Indian Day carnival parade or the Latino festival in the District of Columbia, will be invented to mobilize and define African immigrants publicly as a single community. Most importantly, there is a need for connection and collaboration between Africans in America and African Americans, between Washington's immigrants and its long-established populations.

*Issues of immigrant culture, community, and identity touch close to home for **Diana Baird N'Diaye**, who directed the African Immigrant Folklife Study Project and co-curates the 1997 Festival program. She was born to immigrants from Guyana and Barbados and is married to African-born co-researcher Gorgui N'Diaye. Diana's doctoral dissertation is an ethnographic study of the African Immigrant Folklife research and presentation project.*

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