

# African Immigrant Enterprise in Metropolitan Washington, D.C.: A Photo Essay

*Kinuthia Macharia*

Starting a new business requires innovation, risk taking, hard work, and a lot of discipline. For African immigrants, who have settled in the Washington, D.C. area at least 7,000 miles from home, even more is involved. African immigrants must learn American business practices, laws, and success strategies. Many rely on traditional skills, such as hair braiding, tailoring or dressmaking, and cooking as a basis for their businesses. At the same time, they rely on traditional social networks within their immigrant communities — friendship, kinship, and people from the same region or ethnic group back home — to help them succeed.

Some businesses cater mainly to fellow immigrants looking for services and goods available in Africa, such as the specialty groceries found at the Oyingbo International Store in Hyattsville, Mary-

land. Others serve as a gathering place for the pan-African community, like the Soukous Club and Serengeti Club on Georgia Avenue in Washington, D.C. Still others find their main clientele to be African Americans in search of their roots: for instance, stores specializing in African clothing, music, and crafts.

These photographs suggest the range of businesses established by African immigrants in the greater metropolitan area of Washington, D.C.

---

*Dr. Kinuthia Macharia, originally from Kenya, is a professor in the Sociology Department at The American University. He previously taught at Harvard University. His research interests include culture and entrepreneurship in East Africa and African immigrants in the United States.*

## Suggested Reading

Light, Ivan. 1984. Immigrant and Ethnic Enterprise in North America. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 7: 195-216.

Macharia, Kinuthia. 1997. "The African Entrepreneur in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area: Tradition in the Service of Entrepreneurship." Research report for the African Immigrant Folklife Study Project.



Obeng International Grocery in Hyattsville, Maryland, is one of several African immigrant-owned grocery stores in the Washington, D.C., area. In addition to fresh produce such as yams, cassava, cola nuts, special kinds of peppers and fresh herbs, and packaged spices and condiments imported from Africa, such stores often carry newspapers, magazines, videos and recordings, and other products from home. They are also outlets for African immigrant-produced items such as baked goods from the West African Bakery in Woodbridge, Virginia.

Photo by Harold Dorwin



## African Immigrant Folklife

*(right) Following centuries-old traditions of long-distance trade throughout Africa, itinerant vendors of African decorative arts and jewelry have initiated businesses at many local street festivals in the District of Columbia's Malcolm X Park, in Alexandria, Virginia, and in Silver Spring, Maryland. A vendor, originally from Mali, displays his wares at Freedom Plaza in a manner learned from observing and imitating similar displays in West African tourist markets and European cities.*

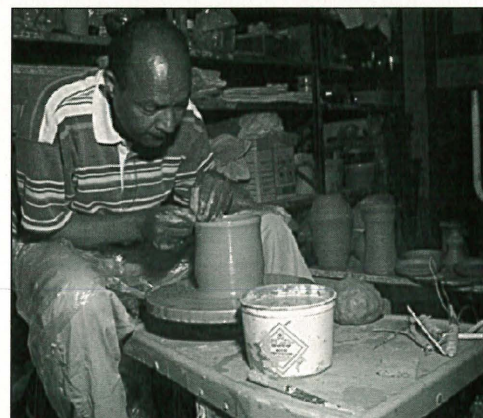
Photo by Nomvula Cook



*(right) Thony Anyiam at his shop in the International Mall, Langley Park, Maryland. Thony Anyiam learned his tailoring skills from family members in his native Ivory Coast. His shop joins a number of other African immigrant-owned shops in the International Mall in Langley Park including Lagos Fabrics. In the traditional African manner, clients pick their fabrics and come to Thony Anyiam for a consultation on styles.*

*Videotapes as well as style books help clients decide on their garments, which will be worn for special occasions such as naming ceremonies, dances, and weddings.*

Photo by Harold Dorwin



*(above) Individual craftspeople such as Mamo Tessema, who creates fine ceramics and enameled jewelry, use traditional skills in new ways here in the Washington, D.C., area. For instance, Mr. Tessema produces pots and cups used for traditional coffee ceremonies; they otherwise would have to be imported from Ethiopia at great cost and risk of damage because of their fragility.*

*His coffee services, however, reflect Western ceramic techniques instead of the traditional unglazed pottery of Ethiopia. Another craftsman in the area, Namori Keita, uses his skill in woodcarving to create architectural artistry which he learned in Senegal and Mali.*

Photo by Harold Dorwin



## African Immigrant Folklife

*(below) Catering is done from restaurants, commercial kitchens, or homes in Washington, D.C., area African immigrant communities. Occasions catered include weddings, naming ceremonies, graduations, and cultural events such as Independence Day celebrations. Some caterers advertise their services in newsletters and other community publications, but many are known only by word of mouth. Photo by Harold Dorwin*



*(left) Over a dozen Ethiopian restaurants are located on and around 18th Street and Columbia Road in the Adams Morgan area of Washington, D.C., serving aromatic stews served over flat injera bread and strong coffees. While these restaurants offer a gathering place for the large Ethiopian community in the area, they also delight Washington diners and tourists from all over the world. A few West African restaurants and one representing South Africa have also sprung up in the area. In addition, African immigrant-owned grocery stores, record shops, and arts and crafts stores line 18th Street. Restaurant owner Cecelia Vilakazi likes to think of this blend of African businesses in Adams Morgan as the beginning of an "African renaissance" in Washington, D.C.*

*Photo by Harold Dorwin*



*(left) The hair-braiding industry in the United States has been stimulated by the presence of highly skilled entrepreneurial African women. This salon in the Mt. Pleasant area is one of many African immigrant-owned braiding salons in Washington, D.C.*

*Photo by Diana Baird N'Diaye*