

EXTENDED LIVES

The African Immigrant Experience in Philadelphia

A Balch Institute Community Profile

The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies

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Cover Illustrations: (background) Restaurateur Fatou Ndiaye; (left to right) Sudanese women at a picnic in Fairmount Park, Socializing outside the Baltimore African Market, Worship at the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Photographs by Vera Viditz-Ward.

PREFACE

Since 1965, our society has been undergoing a slow and subtle transformation through an influx of immigration that rivals that of the late nineteenth century. As part of this transformation, new religions, languages, cultural expressions, and social customs are increasingly becoming part of the fabric of our everyday lives. Here at the Balch Institute, we are working to understand and represent this transformation by exploring the experiences of new non-European immigrants to the Philadelphia area through our New Immigrants Initiative, a series of community-based research and program projects. It has been our privilege and our pleasure to become acquainted with the members of these communities and their activities.

For the last two years, the Balch staff has encountered a diverse array of Africans in our midst – a collage of languages, nationalities, religions, and associations. Many of us here at the Balch have learned a great deal about Africa and Africans through this encounter. This publication is our attempt to share with you some of what we have learned. We hope you share our excitement as you become acquainted with these latest arrivals to our city, and we encourage you to explore the resources listed in the accompanying community directory.

To those Africans who have been here for several generations and to those who have just arrived, we look forward to continuing our work with you in documenting and representing your African experience in America.

John Tenhula

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When the Balch Institute offered me the position of ethnographer and guest curator on their African Immigrant Project two years ago, I could not believe my luck. I had been mulling over the possibility of initiating just such a research project, and here was one already established and funded, just waiting for someone to do the work! At this time, I could not have imagined how interesting and satisfying this work was to be.

For eighteen months, often accompanied by project photographer Vera Viditz-Ward, I was "in the field" – that is, anywhere and everywhere that African immigrants live, work, and congregate in Philadelphia. I attended community association meetings and worshiped in African churches. I went to parties and celebrations, marking both joyful and solemn occasions, and danced to a variety of rhythms. I ate many wonderful dishes and drank perhaps too much tea and coffee, in strong doses from small cups. I shopped in African groceries and mingled with the other patrons. Most importantly, I met and came to know people from all over the African continent. Whether they had been here two decades or two weeks, these immigrants always had an interesting story to tell or provocative opinions to share. Their perspectives on American life led me time and again to re-evaluate my own assumptions and ideas about the country where I was born and raised. I was also impressed by how, despite geographical distance from their home countries, most Africans living in Philadelphia have retained the sense of openness and hospitality that characterizes so many African societies, and that continually delighted me during the years I lived in Senegal.

The individuals who helped me to gather information about their immigrant communities are numerous. You may or may not know who you are, since an ethnographer may learn much from a casual encounter or chance conversation. If you talked with me during the past year and a half, count yourself among my teachers and please accept my thanks. I would like to thank in particular the twenty persons who agreed to be the subject of an oral history: Bernadine Ahonkhai, Cyprian Anyanwu, Seydou Coulibaly, Joseph Dayrell, Charles Douala-Mouteng, Mamady Doumbouya, Joan Gandy-Williams, Siddiq Hadi, Balaynesh Henok, Alfred Kanga, John Kidane, Kuot Mapeok, Jayne Musonye, Alwiya Omar, Suzette Osei, Ibrahima Sanogo, Aklilu Senbeta, Adja Astou Sow, Nebiat Tesfa, and Massa Washington. The experiences that you shared with me of your lives, both before and after immigration to the U.S., have enriched this project immeasurably.

I would also like to thank our African Community Advisory Committee for their guidance during the research process. You have been forthcoming with assistance when I have asked for it and honest in your feedback to my findings and interpretations of the African immigrant experience. It would have been impossible to cover such a vast subject in so short a time without your insider knowledge and commitment to your respective communities.

Leigh Swigart

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