

Research examines a growing immigrant population's self employment in the US

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For a growing immigrant community in the United States, setting up shop means blending tools of the trade from home with discoveries made in the new country, and there's a strategy that's threading through an array of small businesses.

Leila Rodriguez a University of Cincinnati assistant professor of anthropology, presents her research, "Traces of Home, Legacies of Culture: Business Development Among Nigerian Immigrants in New York City." The study will be highlighted Nov. 20 at the 110th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Montreal.

Rodriguez says she became interested in exploring the Nigerian business community because Nigerians do not have educational or [language barriers](#) like other immigrants who turn to self-employment when they cannot enter the U.S. job market. Through her research of these [small business owners](#) in New York, she discovered that many of them were entrepreneurs in their native country.

Supported by funding from the National Science Foundation, Rodriguez spent a year in New York City where there's a high percentage of Nigerian immigrants, conducting surveys with 85 Nigerian [business owners](#) and face-to-face interviews with an additional 45 entrepreneurs. Their businesses included small restaurants, groceries, legal services, video and clothing stores that primarily served the African and African-American community.

"What I found is that when they move to the U.S., they have this knowledge about an African business model," says Rodriguez. "But over time, they'll start adapting more western [business strategies](#), and pick and choose what's useful from both cultures."

Rodriguez traced their business-related social networks, including suppliers, employees and customers. She says recent [migrants](#) logistically are going to build their networks within the Nigerian community, depending on Nigerian suppliers, but eventually, she says these business owners will explore suppliers that could be less expensive. "When I asked about how they hire their employees, some business owners said they just put a sign in the window. But others preferred hiring family, because they felt that those employees would do a better job out of family obligation."

"However, they preferred not to have that social closeness with their customer base," adds Rodriguez. "They were concerned about how it would reflect on them if they tried to collect money, for instance, from a member of their church – if the church member claimed he or she was unable to pay."

In summary, she says she found that as they hung out their business signs in the U.S., these entrepreneurs weren't just letting go of their old business strategies and developing an entirely new plan. Instead, they became very strategic and conscious about the social distance they wanted between them and their suppliers, customers and employees.

Rodriguez says contemporary African immigrants, like the Nigerian community, are being called the new "model minority" by scholars, a term once applied to Asians emigrating to the U.S. The "model" status is due to the fact that the Nigerian population tends to be well educated and wealthier than other populations emigrating to the U.S.

Rodriguez says that Nigerians represent the largest group of African immigrants in the U.S., with the population nearly doubling between 2000 and 2007, according to the American Community Survey. As of 2009 there were more than 216,000 Nigerians who reported emigrating to the U.S. – about 14 percent of the total African population that had immigrated to the U.S. in that period. The first wave of migration started in the 70s, after Nigerian students began attending American and European universities following Nigeria's independence from England in 1960. Although Nigerians and Africans (1.5 million) make up a small percentage (4 percent) of the overall immigrant population in the U.S., the population of Nigerians is growing.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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