

African Entrepreneurs: On the Continent and in the Diaspora

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For over 20 years I have studied the dynamics of entrepreneurship in Africa. This has included field work in Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Botswana, South Africa, and Senegal. The African entrepreneurial landscape spans the spectrum from informal sector traditional microenterprises to multi-million dollar modern firms headed by college-educated men and women.

My next phase of research looks at entrepreneurship among Africans in the Diaspora – that is, Africans who live and operate their businesses outside the African Continent. My initial foray into this topic took a historical perspective for a paper that I presented to the Southern Conference on African American Studies, “African-American Entrepreneurs as Heroes and Heroines in American History.” The paper began with a profile of Anthony Johnson who is thought to be the first person of African descent to become an entrepreneur in America. He arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1621 with a group of about 20 Africans who came to the New World as indentured servants. It is believed that he was originally from the Angola/Congo region of Africa and was brought to America by Portuguese sailors. This established a context for African entrepreneurship in the Diaspora which I had previously explored in a presentation for the traveling exhibit, “Inside Africa...Diaspora” section, at the University of Florida Museum of Natural History, which examined the disbursement of Africa’s

ethnic populations. I bring this topic to the college classroom in my textbook chapter, “Spatial Organization and Distribution of Economic Activity,” in *Geography of Sub-Saharan Africa*. I have also given lectures to high school students in the Upward Bound Academy at UF.

As part of this next research phase I have begun to collect data on the increase in immigration of Africans to America and their entrepreneurial activities. I will start with gateway cities such as Fort Lauderdale, Houston, and Washington, DC. A workshop at UF on



“Doing Business in Africa” which I co-organized with Dr. Agnes Leslie, was attended by business owners from several countries in Africa including a self-described “African-American” who recently relocated from South Africa and established connections between Chambers of Commerce in the Western Cape and their counterparts in South Florida.

Dr. Anita Spring and I have also been invited to update our research on regional entrepreneurial networks for a book with the working title *New Private Sector Actors in Africa*.



In late 2011, I was proud to work with Dr. Leslie and Kenyan graduate student Nathan Wangusi to create the Dr. Wangari Maathai Garden on campus in honor of the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in environmental sustainability, human rights, and economic development.



Barbara McDade Gordon is associate professor of geography and director of the UF Upward Bound Academy. She is affiliate faculty in the Center for African Studies.