

The Linguistic Landscape of Massachusetts: A Case Study of Businesses Owned by African Immigrants

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate the linguistic landscape of businesses owned by African immigrants in Massachusetts, USA. The data was sampled from Boston and Worcester, where many Africans reside. Data was collected by taking pictures of inscriptions of the stores owned by African immigrants. The data showed contact between the indigenous languages of the immigrants and colonial languages. The inscriptions are usually a mixture of the English and local languages of the immigrants. The images portrayed the connection to Africa through the use of the word ‘African’ and the use of symbols that connect to Africa. It was again revealed that religion and African writing systems form part of the linguistic landscape of the immigrants.

Keywords: Linguistics landscape, African languages, Linguistic typology, Immigrant language

1. Introduction: The Background of the Paper

This paper presents the nature of language preservation by African immigrants in Boston through inscriptions on shops and stores. Laundry and Bourhis (1997) introduced the concept of linguistic landscape. Where the main idea behind it was centered on language. It became essential when those tasked with language planning saw that it was relevant to mark boundaries with language as the tool (Laundry and Bourhis 1997). Laundry and Bourhis (1997) highlight instances of grudges in Belgium regarding the use of French and Flemish, which was resolved with the idea that later became a vital aspect of the concept of the linguistic landscape. Linguistic landscape (LL) focuses solely on written language, as Gorter (2006: 2) posits that it is “the use of language in its written form in the public sphere.”

Specifically, linguistic landscape involves “the language of public road signs, advertising

billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings” (Laundry and Bourhis 1997: 25) but most research works on LL have focused also on territorial revelation. Linguistic landscape ideally has two main functions: to inform and act as a symbol (Laundry and Bourhis 1997). I explain this in sections 1.1 and 1.2.

1.1 Informative Function

Regarding giving information, linguistic landscape provides information on various languages in a geographical area. The phraseology employed in the linguistic landscape of a site shows the nature of languages used in a territory (Laundry and Bourhis 1997). The linguistic landscape is a good way of determining whether a community is monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual (Abramova 2016). Abramova (2016:48) posits that linguistic landscape gives knowledge about “the level of the area involved in globalization processes.” [t]he use of international languages like English in a shared geographical space shows that the community is also involved in global business. Similarly, linguistic landscape in the local language shows the community's borders.

Linguistic landscape provides information concerning a linguistic territory in a diglossic state (Laundry and Bourhis 1997). According to Ferguson (1959: 325), diglossia is “where two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community, each with a specific role to play.” Laundry and Bourhis (1997) aver that the public signs will be composed of the high variety, whereas the low variety will be left for the homes and the local communities.

1.2 Symbolic Function

The symbolic function of linguistic landscape relates to a language's status in a linguistic territory (Laundry and Bourhis 1997, Abramova 2016). When the native language of a given linguistic territory is present in both the public and private scene, it presents a situation in which the speakers of the languages hold their language in high esteem. On the other side, when the language is mainly absent from the linguistic landscape of a linguistic territory, it is established that the speakers of that language have a negative attitude towards using their language (Laundry and Bourhis 1997).

Aside from these two main functions, linguistic landscape is also a way of protecting languages and creating an awareness of one's background. This paper shows how African immigrants' indigenous languages are used with the English language in public spaces. Even though English is the primary language used in USA and Boston, alongside Spanish, which is also widely used in the area, I hypothesize that there is a tendency for African immigrants to use their indigenous languages even though those who may patronize their goods and services may not speak their languages. This is a case of language and identity preservation, and it is widespread in a multilingual society where the commodification of linguistic landscape is predominant. The scope of this paper is confined to Boston and Worcester because these places have a high concentration of African immigrants. As such, I try to understand the nature of the linguistic landscape of shops and stores owned and operated by these African immigrants in Boston and the linguistic features employed.

The last part of the paper is organized as follows. In section 2, I discuss the literature on linguistic landscape relating to the current scope of the paper, and I present the data collection process in section 3. The data analysis and discussion are provided in section 4. The final part of the paper is the conclusion of the paper. Here, I summarize the main points in the paper, and I also give the implications of the findings.

2. The Literature on Linguistic Landscape

Linguistic landscape is one key element to look out for to understand the evolution of an area or an urban space. Speakers of a language in each territory will expose their identity through their writing spaces if they are allowed to or if it is not against the laws of a given community. When a large group of migrants settles in a community, they come with their culture and languages, usually accompanied by their values. As Yataco and Córdova Hernández (2016: 154) pointed out, “[p]lacing the spotlight on linguistic diversity means empowering the voice of the peoples whose languages have been cornered in the private sphere [...]. In short, it is a form of symbolic appropriation of the territory and an emotional revaluation of the Latin American linguistic repertoire.” The present paper undertakes a case study on this issue to fill this gap. This study provided useful insights into how this unique group utilizes language in their companies and how language affects their relationships with consumers and the larger community.

Purnanto et al. (2021) examined texts’ frequency, form, and informational-symbolic functions in public spaces in Surakarta City, Indonesia, within the Linguistic landscape approach. Their data sample involved 292 photos collected from five subdistricts in Surakarta in Indonesia. Aside from taking pictures, they interviewed people to see their perception of language use. They found that five languages were used in the public spaces of Surakarta, Indonesia. This data showed the multilingual nature of Surakarta. Among the languages found to be present, Indonesian was the dominant language, followed by Javanese. There was also the use of Arabic, which symbolizes the presence of Islam and Muslims in the area. Of course, English was also present to tell the globalization status of the community, while the use of Japanese also symbolizes capitalism, according to Purnanto et al. (2021). The present study seeks to investigate the attitudes of immigrants in Massachusetts to see how language contact has affected or influenced the public space of migrants.

Betti (2018) analyzed the linguistic landscape of cities in the United States of America. Their data involved both official and private inscriptions on public spaces. The linguistic landscape of cities in the USA, according to Betti (2018), shows bilingualism and biculturalism because of contact between different worlds. The languages involved here are Spanish and English. Through the linguistic landscape, we notice language revitalization and visibility. This also represents linguistic diversity as many languages compete for public spaces. Even though the USA is an English-speaking country, official writings in the public spaces are not solely in English. We see English compete with Spanish for spaces in buses and other spaces. This shows how linguistic landscape promotes diversity and also literacy. The present author has learned some Spanish words through the linguistic landscape even though there has never been an effort to learn the language.

Karolak's (2020) study on the linguistic landscape research in the Souk Naif area in Dubai is an excellent paper to look at. Souk Naif area in Dubai is a populated migrant city. English and Arabic are spoken in Dubai, but English has become the lingua franca since people are not encouraged enough to learn Arabic. Migrants are more inclined to speak English given it is a global language. Aside from English and Arabic being the mother tongues of native speakers, there are other languages spoken by expatriates and migrants (Karolak 2020). Karolak (2020) finds that what the linguistic landscape of the area reflects is their differing social standing. It is essential to point out that the linguistic landscape of multilingual communities reveals to us how some minority languages are discriminated against. This is shown in Karolak (2020). The author finds that social hierarchy, official policies, and language use in the United Arab Emirates have led to declining minority languages in public spaces.

Despite the substantial quantity of literature on linguistic landscape, there has been a considerable void in study on the language landscape of enterprises owned by African immigrants in Massachusetts.

3. Methodology

Data were collected using the bottom-up approach. A bottom-up approach is an official approach that is not regulated by governmental laws and language policies. This approach was chosen because it fits this study. This study involves African immigrants, and by so doing, researching the linguistic landscape of these populations will be what the immigrants put up and not what the state of Massachusetts put up. This is also because non-Africans do not use African languages in the USA, and African languages are not part of the official languages in the USA. Data was obtained by locating stores and businesses owned by African immigrants in Massachusetts and taking photographs of the names of these stores by looking up the stores through their google addresses and taking a screenshot of the inscriptions on their business.

4. Discussion

In this section, I discuss the data gathered for this study. The data showed that African immigrants in Massachusetts maintain their identity and language. There are instances of both monolingual and bilingual inscriptions. Most of the words used are the origin of the immigrants. Famous among them is the word 'Africa.' This is a way of showing their identity not to their specific country but also to other African immigrants. Below are the data and the analysis.

Figure 1 shows how an African, likely a Muslim has labeled his business. The restaurant offers both American and African cuisine. The signpost near the business also has the African Map in addition to the Fatima Café This symbolizes the owner's identity and cultural diversity since the inscription on the restaurant also has American and African cuisine. This is a reflection of people who come there to eat.



Figure 1. Fatima's Cafe

Figure 2 is a restaurant owned by a Ghanaian. This is reflected in using the African map, the Ghana flag, and the word 'African.' The inscription also has the American flag. This is a way of accommodating Americans to the restaurant. Another thing the owner of the store uses is the European Union flag. This tells us how diverse the owner of the store is. Even though the owner is Ghanaian and African, an African language is not used. The owner may not be shying away from using their mother tongue. Still, it also means that the target of this restaurant is not predominantly Ghanaians but other African natives, Americans, and Europeans. Typical of Africans, it is not new that the owners name their stores after themselves. Hence, 'Victoria' may be the owner's name or someone dear to them.



Figure 2. Victoria Evergreen Kitchen: African Restaurant

The image below shows that the owner is a Ghanaian immigrant. The inscription on the store anokye and krom are two Ghanaian words. Anokye is the name of a famous 'fetish' priest in Ghana who served a famous king of the Ashanti kingdom, Osei Tutu I. The word krom is a Twi word for 'town' or 'village.' Hence, the name of the restaurant Anokye Krom means

‘Anokye’s village or Anokye’s town. This restaurant is located in Worcester, one of the most populated Ghanaian cities in the USA. The owner also uses the African map and the American flag to show diversity. The inscription on this store is bilingual because it uses Twi and English phrases, ‘Anokye Krom African-American Restaurant.’ As seen in almost all of the images gathered, the central theme of the business is always in English. Because of this, you will expect the owner of this store not to have the word for a restaurant in Twi.



Figure 3. Anokye Krom African-American Restaurant

Just like Figure 3, Figures 4 and 5 are also of Ghanaian origin. In figure 4, There is the use of the capital city of Ghana, Accra. Accra girl is a common phrase used in Ghana to mean ‘high-class girls.’ The use of the Ghanaian word ‘Accra’ and English words and the African map shows that the owner is preserving their identity and appealing to people who are not of Ghanaian origin.



Figure 4. Accra Girls Restaurant



Figure 5. Elder Paintsil’s African Restaurant

Figure 5 above is a business owned by a person of Ghanaian origin, and this is reflected in the use of the name ‘Paintsil,’ which is a Ghanaian name, and the use of the Ghanaian flag. The inscription on the store also shows that this person is a Christian and holds an ‘eldership’ position in the church. Ghanaian Christians in the church also prefer to be called with the ‘Elder’ title. Again, as is expected, the restaurant will always be in English, and African will modify the term restaurant to show what is being offered.

Figure 6 is a hair braiding salon, and the owner of this store is an African immigrant because of her name. Rukiatu is of Muslim origin, and since the inscription on the store depicts an African origin, we can conclude that the store owner in figure 6 is an African Muslim. The languages used in this image are English words. Even though the name ‘Rukiatu’ and African lead us to an African origin, the language used is English. This also follows the linguistics landscape of African immigrants in the USA, where the use of African is always present in their public spaces.



Figure 6. Rukiatu African Hair Braiding

Unlike the name ‘Rukiatu; which cannot be traced to a single African country, ‘Jalloh’ in figure 7 is of Sierra Leonean descent. Even though there are some people from different African countries bearing this name. The conclusion is that this store is also referred to as Freetown market on google. Since Freetown is the capital city of Sierra Leone, we can conclude that the owner is from Sierra Leone. Again, the author is mixing the Sierra Leonean word Jalloh with the African market as you will expect Africans to do.

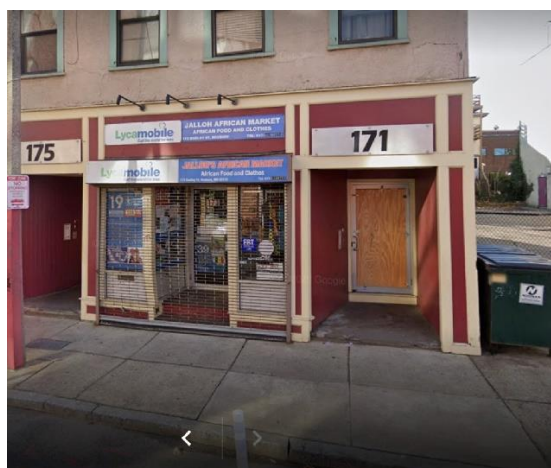


Figure 7. Jalloh African Market

As shown in Figure 8, Kaba African Market depicts a style of dress women wear. The word ‘Kaba’ is popular in Ghana and may also be popular in the West African sub-region. It is a dress sewed with African clots and usually worn by older women in their forties and above.

Any African, specifically Ghanaian in Roxbury who sees this inscription will know they sell African clothes in the store. Figure 8 is the store's image, accompanied by Figure 9, a sample of clothes found on the store's website.

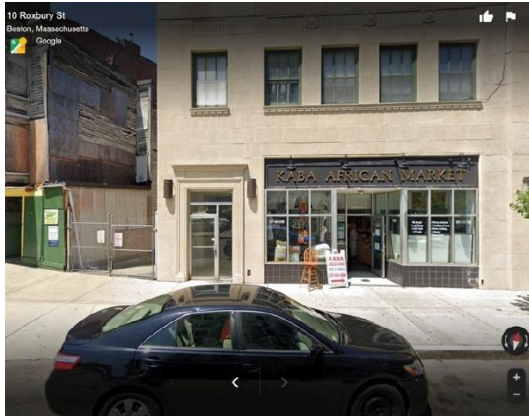


Figure 8. Kaba African Market Figure 9. Sample of cloths used in sewing Kaba

The store owner in Figure 10 is a Nigerian, and its inscription means that the restaurant will serve only Nigerian foods. The inscriptions are not in the local language, but the word 'Nigerian' ties this store to the Nigerian market in the text. The name 'Pelloma' is unknown, but it is the owner's name.



Figure 10. Pelloma Nigerian Cuisine

Africans are very religious and believe that whatever they have or will ever have is from God, Allah, or a supreme being. This is reflected in their linguistic landscape too. Figures 11 and 12 below are two African businesses, a supermarket, and a restaurant, inscribed within a religious domain. Figure 11 is from a Christian African-American because of the 'Blessing of God.' Figure 12, on the hand, is owned by a Muslim African-American from Somali because of the use of Tawakal, which can be translated as 'trusting in God's plan.' The language of these inscriptions is not localized, making sense because a religious immigrant sees all other people from other countries within the same faith as a family. It is not a coincidence that you do not find a projection of their origin in their texts, except for the word for 'African' in Figure 11.

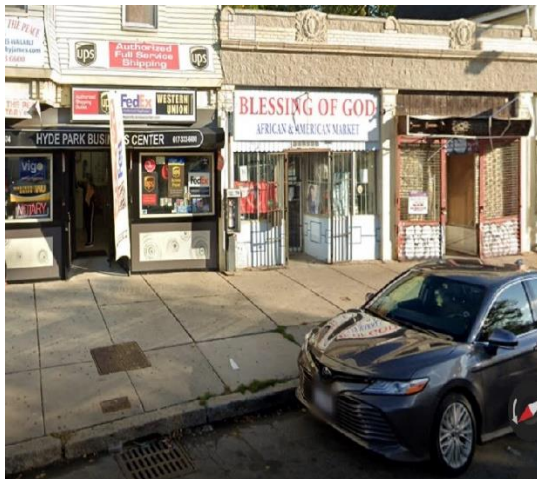


Figure 11. Blessing of God



Figure 12. Tawakal Halal Café

Figure 13 has a hybrid origin. The text on the sign of the image is also a hybrid made up of the Latin alphabet and an Arabic script. The owner represents his name in the Latin alphabet and writes in Arabic, Halal is (Note 1). This inscription tells us that at least the store owner is competent in two writing systems and two cultures. Again, it also tells us that the target group of the restaurants are people who are familiar with the script. They have indicated that they serve North African and Middle Eastern dishes on their menu, and the owner is also from North Africa.



Figure 13. Ashur Restaurant

It is noteworthy to mention that a few of the plates utilized in the restaurant for serving purposes feature the Arabic alphabet on them. I show this in figure 14, which displays a picture on their website. This indicates that the owners are projecting their culture, rooted in Arabic, through Islam.



Figure 14. A plate with Arabic text

In what follows, I show the linguistic landscape of Ethiopian stores in the sample. There are a lot of Ethiopian markets in the sample, and below is a representation of what they are represented.

The text in Figure 15 below is symbolic. Linguistically, the texts are made of English words ‘the Blue Nile Ethiopian cuisine.’ In this text, the owner projects their place of origin without even highlighting ‘Ethiopia.’ What we see is the name ‘Blue Nile.’ ‘The Nile used here directly references the ‘River Nile’ but specifically the blue one, not the ‘White Nile.’ The ‘Blue Nile’ flows through Ethiopia and Sudan. The Blue Nile has its source in Lake Tana to Khartoum in Ethiopia (Kendie, 1999). Since the ‘Blue Nile’ is associated with Ethiopia, the texts in Figure 16 need not highlight Ethiopia again, a reason why ‘Ethiopian cuisine’ is captured in small letters.

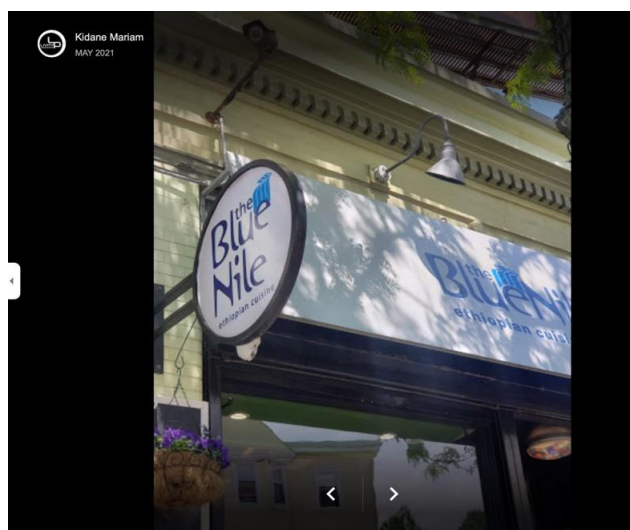


Figure 15. The Blue Nile

Unlike Figure 15, Figure 16 has a direct reference to Ethiopia. The owner of this store has ‘ETHIOPIAN MARKET’ written in bold with the colors of Ethiopia boldly displayed. This owner shows their origin and does not include the African or American words like in Figure 15.

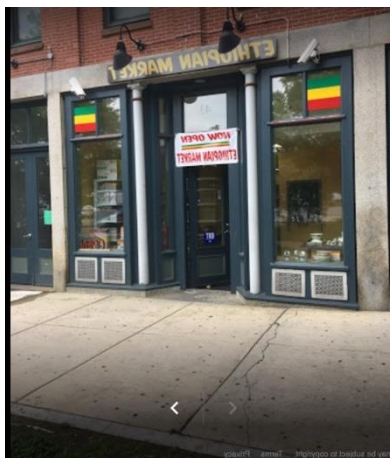


Figure 16. Ethiopian Market

Figure 17 is a business owned by an Ethiopian. The inscription on this text is hybrid. The owner uses the Latin and Amharic scripts, representing two languages, English and Amharic. Amharic is the official language of Ethiopia. Ethiopians speak English as a global language, but they are attached to their language. It is one of the few languages in Africa which does not have English as its native language. The linguistic language of Ethiopian stores shows a solid reference to their language, culture, and heritage. The word ‘Merkato’ is a place in Ethiopia known as Addis Mercato. The area has the largest market in Africa; hence, the name ‘Mercato’ now refers to a large market. The official spelling is ‘Mercato,’ but this store’s owner uses the letter ‘k’ instead of ‘c.’ This is not an error; the owner preferred to use the phonetic pronunciation of the letter ‘c’ in ‘Mercato’ which is [k].

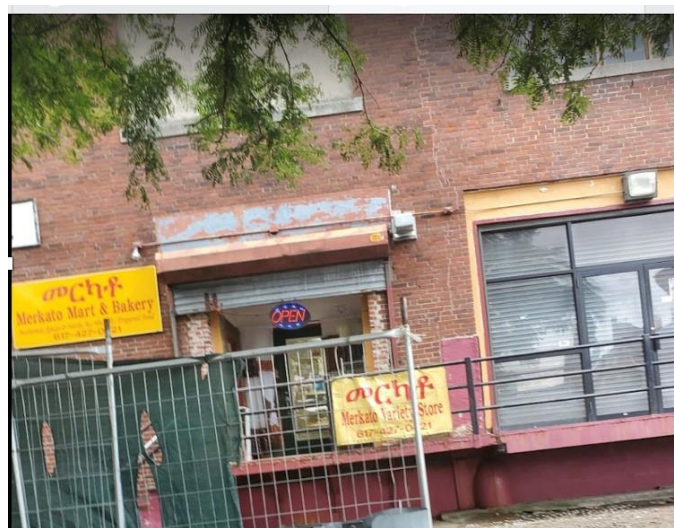


Figure 17. Merkato Mart & Bakery

In the remaining images, I provide some photos where the inscription does not use the name of the country of origin of the immigrant or the country's flag but uses the colors of their national flag.

Figure 18 is a Nigerian restaurant named ‘Obosá,’ a Nigerian word. According to people, this word means ‘God’s hands or the number 7 in Edo, a language spoken in Nigeria. The

inscription on this store uses Nigerian colors, green and red. The colors used by the owner replace the name of the inscription, hence the omission of ‘Nigeria’ in the text. Compare this with Figure 12, where the colors do not point to Nigeria, so the text involves the name ‘Nigeria’ for people to see it is a Nigerian market.

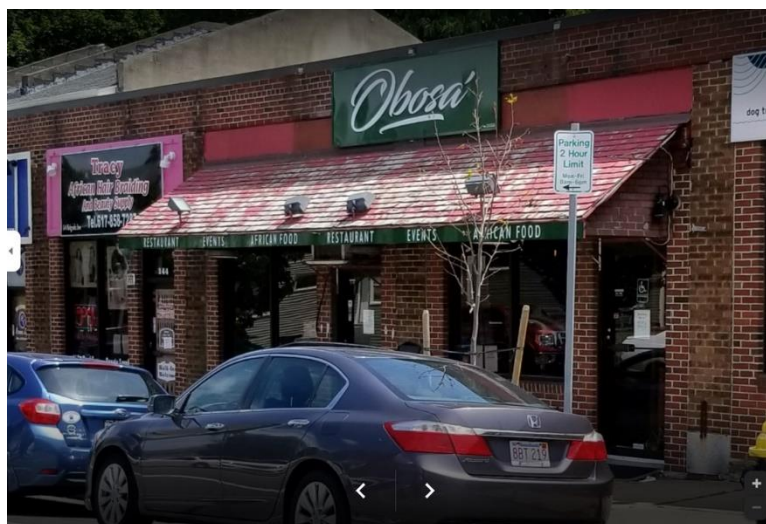


Figure 18. Obos á

Figure 19 follows the symbolic nature of Figure 18 above. A Cape Verdean owns a Cesaria restaurant, and they serve Cape Verdean meals. Cesaria is the name of a girl of Spanish, and Latin origin, meaning “head of hair.” Even though the store's name does not directly reference Portuguese or Kriolu, the colors used in the inscription directly reference Cape Verd, the colors of Cape Verd are blue, white, red, and yellow. These are the colors that we see in Figure 19. Another symbolic thing about the store's design is that it has the design of the national flag of Cape Verd, where the color blue surrounds red and white. I show the flag of Cape Verd in Figure 20 below.

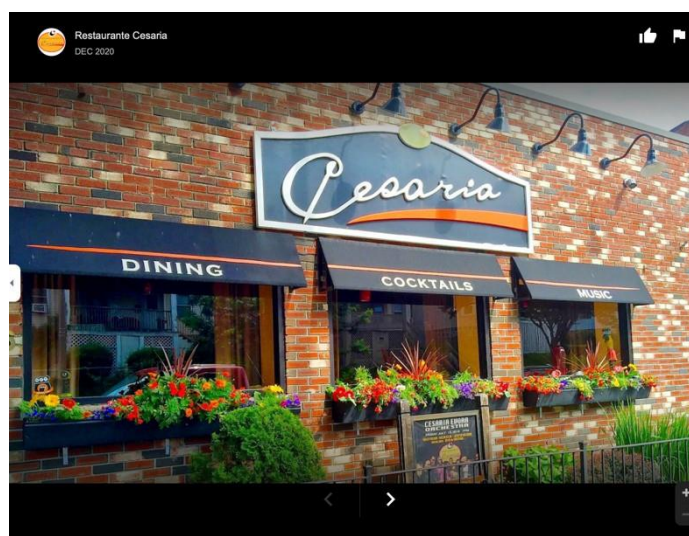


Figure 19. Cesaria



Figure 20. Sierra Leone flag

5. Conclusion

This paper has looked at the linguistic landscape of businesses owned by African immigrants in Massachusetts, USA. The data was purposively gathered from black communities in Massachusetts. The data has shown that language contact plays a significant role in the linguistic landscape of these immigrants. The immigrants used their indigenous languages in their texts, and the owners' names dominated. The data also shows that the term 'African' is ubiquitous. This indicates that they are still attached to their origin even though they are on a different continent. One thing that is also common is the use of the phrase 'African American.' This is an example of accommodation where these immigrants are showing that we have a blend of cultures. The data also indicates that African scripts are also employed. This is seen in the use of the Amharic script. Religion also is depicted through the linguistic landscape of these immigrants. There is evidence of Islam and Christian faiths being displayed. The texts on the signs are both monolingual and bilingual. The African names used are of African origin, so they count as bilingual when they are used with English words.

Finally, a critical element from the data is that all these immigrants have a strong affection for their African origins. This is boldly shown when they display their country flags, names, and the African map.

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Note

Note 1. This was confirmed to be by an Arabic speaker.

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