As Somalian music played in the background, barbers snipped the hair of their African clients.

A vendor plucked homemade sambusas -- pastry shells typically stuffed with potatoes, peas and other fillings -- from a bucket.

Women dressed in colorful head scarves and wraps seemed to float through the aisles of the marketplace.

Far from Africa, in this nondescript former grocery store in San Diego's City Heights neighborhood, the city’s Somalis have opened a marketplace that serves as a bridge between old traditions and new ones.

"We are still experimenting to see what sells the most," said Asia Nur, one of five women who joined forces to open a stand that sells hair and beauty products, such as brand-name colognes.

It's a big step for the former war refugees, most of whom are Muslim. An estimated 6,000 to 12,000 live in San Diego, which is believed to have one of the three largest populations of Somalis in the United States.

"The first years here were tough, but the advantage was that they came from very dire situations and they are people who have persevered," said Abdi Mohamoud, executive director of the Horn of Africa community group.

San Diego-based Horn of Africa, which is behind the market project, provides services to East African refugees and other immigrants, with an emphasis on Somalis.

Mohamoud, who is Somali, arrived in the United States as a refugee in 1982 during a war between Ethiopia and Somalia, but most of San Diego's Somalis arrived in the early 1990s, fleeing a civil war, he said. The country is now divided into three autonomous regions, but turmoil continues.

Many of those who made it to San Diego first endured months, even years, in African refugee camps and typically lost everything they had back home.

The neighborhood strip mall, called African Marketplace, is something San Diego's Somalis have yearned for as they heard about Somalian markets opening in other U.S. cities such as Minneapolis.
The project was hindered in part by high real estate and other startup costs in San Diego, but finally the leased property at 54th Street and El Cajon Boulevard was remodeled to hold about 40 stands.

The market includes a money transfer center, Internet services and a video store that becomes an impromptu movie theater showing Somalian films. Most of the shops sell jewelry and clothes, ranging from sweat shirts to patterned robes worn by Somalian women.

A restaurant is expected to open in a few weeks. In the meantime, some vendors are informally selling snacks, such as homemade samosas.

There's also a Muslim prayer area. Both the prayer area and the restaurant have places set aside for women and men per tradition.

While some of the market's colors and sounds evoke their past lives, many of the vendors' stories are of transition and adaptation.

Ahmed Maani, 22, arrived in San Diego when his family fled the Somali civil war. He helps at the family's store when he isn't attending Stanford University.

"My father was a big businessman in Somalia, but then when he fled from Somalia he had nothing with him," he said. "Life was at its worst."

After five years in refugee camps, the family made it to San Diego. Maani excelled in school. He plans to study law, and is interested in entering politics in the United States or Somalia.

Though the market is seen as an informal meeting point for Somalis, vendors hope the center will attract visitors interested in spending money and getting to know more about the culture.

Online: For a multimedia story on the African Marketplace, go to http://uniontrib.com/more/african

Caption: 2 PICS
1. Fadumo Hashi, 16, folded scarves in her mother's shop in City Heights' African Marketplace, a community project aimed at helping Somalian refugees. 2. Video store owner Ahmed Farah (left) discussed a Somalian movie with customer and friend Abdilahi Ibrahim in Iftin Entertainment at the African Marketplace. (Eds. R,S,F) 1,2.
Peggy Peattie / Union-Tribune photos
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