Citizenship and Belonging:  
The African Community and the Politics of Alienation in Ireland

- Theophilus Ejorh -

Introduction

This article analyzes the debates around citizenship, with a focus on Ireland’s politics of alienation. It examines how the new citizenship and immigration regime straddles the boundaries of gender, race and ethnicity and asserts that a particular category of migrants – African women migrants – were the motivation and justification for enacting the new citizenship law, as gender and ethnicity became a new way of constructing the Irish national identity. It demonstrates that Ireland is historically a society in which discrimination, division and inequality have festered along gender, ethnic and religious fault-lines. Analyses also focus on the historical basis of current exclusionary construct and practice of citizenship and belonging in Ireland and its implications for the participation of the African community in society. In contrast, the essay articulates what has been described as inclusive citizenship, which is based on the principles of social justice and the inclusion of all members of society irrespective of their identities. Here, citizenship is based on the right of inhabitancy rather than on natality, descendancy and naturalization. I have drawn on my recent research on prospects of inclusive citizenship for the African community in Ireland (Ejorh 2006) to demonstrate that in spite of the strategic measures of control and exclusive citizenship practices in the country, members of the African community are actively involved in various aspects of Irish civic life.

Reflections on citizenship: ancient and modern

Citizenship is a contested concept, earliest conversations around it dating back to Antiquity. Ancient Greek city-states constructed citizenship in a manner that
perpetuated an ideology of discrimination, inferiorizing and marginalizing particular members of society. In most city-states, such as Athens, only adult males were citizens and citizenship was attained on the basis of kinship, community ties and inheritance (Castles and Davidson 2000). Citizenship carried with it certain rights, duties and obligations, as the onus of political administration rested upon all citizens, whereas non-citizens (e.g. women, resident foreigners/migrant labourers and minors) were obligated to perform the physical (non-civic) tasks of providing food, shelter and materiel (Horowitz 1976). Drawing on the socio-political temper of this society, Aristotle had argued in Politics (Barker 1962), that an individual’s residence in a given city-state did not qualify him/her to be called a citizen of that state, rather that citizenship involved the right and duty of participation in political processes and administration of justice, which were considered the two domains of native-born males.

Modern critics, notably feminist scholars, have deplored this Greek society for perpetuating discrimination and inequalities. It was considered a phallocentric universe in which the values and capabilities of women were spurned, an oppressive system that marginalized minorities and failed to appreciate the “moral worth” of other members of society (Irigaray 1993; Freeland 1998).

Unlike ancient Athens, imperial Rome practiced a multiethnic model of citizenship whereby citizenship no longer centered strictly on kinship, community ties or membership of a particular state (Castles and Davidson 2000). Rather, with Rome’s metamorphosis from city-state to empire, people from foreign cultures were incorporated into the political framework and granted limited, second-class, Roman citizenship (Ibid). The Roman model provided the basis upon which the element of universality was later integrated into citizenship rights, but while the Greek model was based on democracy, as power was believed to be controlled by the whole people rather than a minority, Rome practiced oligarchy whereby power rested in the hands of a powerful elite minority that consisted of wealthy families and accomplished military men (Castles and Davidson 2000). Similarly, only Roman- and Italian-born individuals participated in civic life, such as serving in the legions, voting, holding public offices and taking part in political debates, whereas Roman women
and immigrants from Rome’s conquered territories, provinces, colonies and protectorates were excluded from civic life (Martin 1999).

As in classical societies, understandings and practices of citizenship in the modern world vary across cultural milieu and historical junctures. Citizenship has become a buzzword suffused with diverse and often confusing meanings, as a variety of citizenships now exists in scholarship in a way that reflects particular leanings.

British theorist of citizenship, Thomas Humphrey Marshall (1950), in mid-Twentieth Century constructed a tripartite evolutionary typology in relation to the acquisition of citizenship, anchoring it on three particular types of rights (civil, political and social), which he periodized according to particular historical epochs. First, Marshall assigned civil rights to the Eighteenth Century, then political rights to the Nineteenth Century and social rights to the Twentieth Century. The centrality of his theory was social rights, which he argued was necessary for individuals’ attainment of full citizenship, adding that “full rights” was connected to social class. His theory has, however, been critiqued particularly by neo-conservative thinkers, who argue that social citizenship should be based on achievement because it fosters a culture of dependency rather than active citizenship (Bulmer and Rees 1996).

In the liberal sense, citizenship is defined in relation to belonging and inclusion in the nation-state. Such membership is predicated upon a set of rights and duties, which according to Adrian Little (2002, p. 89) defines the “relationship between individuals, their peers and social institutions.” But while the liberal perspective pretends to recognize “equality of status”, it permits different kinds of social inequalities within the citizenry. This ambivalence, according to Little, has resulted in both the “erosion of various citizenship rights” and resurgent attempts to radically reconstruct the meaning of citizenship (Ibid, p. 89). This alternative reconstruction of citizenship is described by Ruth Lister (1998) as differentiated universalism and Iris Young (1990a, 1990b) as the politics of difference.

Lister (1998, p. 83) defines ‘differentiated universalism’ as a politics of citizenship that recognizes “the equal moral worth and participation and inclusion of all persons” regardless of their varied identities and backgrounds. Earlier, Young (1993, p. 135) had similarly argued that the creation of a polity hinged upon “social equality among explicitly differentiated groups who conceive themselves as dwelling
together without exclusions” (quoted in Little 2002, p. 97). Thus, for the new radical theorists, right of inhabitancy rather than right of birth or inheritance should determine membership and inclusion even when individuals are differentiated socially and culturally. This is why radical theorists accuse modern liberal democracies of alienating specific groups, denying them rights and opportunities for full participation in civic society simply because of being different.

Little argues that minority ethnic communities may feel alienated if their representation in formal politics is limited and their interests inadequately acknowledged. Furthermore, social and political structures can be designed purposely to inhibit the admission of immigrant and ethnic minorities into the public domain, a reason the radical perspective seeks to reconstruct political structures in a way that “the voices of excluded communities are heard and dominant powers...challenged” (Ibid, p. 98). For that reason, the anti-liberal perspective makes one thing clear: the alienation of minority groups provides the basis for their struggles for inclusive citizenship.

Desires for citizenship by excluded people involve certain shared fundamental values, such as desires for social justice, recognition and self-determination, and a feeling of solidarity with other members of society (Kabeer 2005; Dower and Williams 2002). Naila Kabeer (2005) examines these values in the collection she edited, entitled Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions, arguing that they can be useful in organizing collective life and strengthening social ties, even though they may not exist universally. Kabeer applies justice to the sense of treating individuals fairly without discriminations while also knowing “when it is fair” to treat them differently. She stresses that there is a need for an incorporation of this difference in matters of law, policy and citizenship.

In this way, the aspirations for justice by minoritized and excluded groups are intrinsically connected to a craving for recognition, defined by Kabeer as both “the recognition of the intrinsic worth of all human beings” as well as “the recognition of and respect for their differences” (Kabeer 2005, p. 4). For Wheeler (2005), two key elements of recognition, i.e. respect and dignity, constitute good grounds for struggle by marginalized communities worldwide in their relationship with society and state.
The literature affirms the centrality of self-determination as the basis of struggles by minority groups for the increased participation and representation of their members in the public domain, although other reasons for struggle may concern demands relating to the private domain. Kabeer (2005) has argued, however, that collective struggles have historically motivated minority organizations in the quest for social change.

Solidarity, described as “the sense of connectedness” (Kabeer 2005), is another key element that characterizes inclusive citizenship. In revolutionary terms, it transcends immediate affinities and traditional boundaries, and can be provoked either by common experiences of alienation or invoked in response to apparent injustice done to other individuals or groups. In this way, solidarity assumes a political character when it is employed as a vehicle for achieving or exercising collective bargaining power or as a tool for collective struggles for self-determination, in a manner that surpasses individual experiences of disaffection (Ibid).

Citizenship and the Paradox of Belonging in Ireland

Although the liberal discourse on citizenship makes claims to universality of rights, there are instances where citizenship rights are selectively bestowed by modern nation-states through formal politics of exclusion. The new Irish citizenship regime, as the new Constitution (as amended 24 June 2004) and Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 2004 suggest, somehow reflects such a selective conferral of rights.

There is a common erroneous notion that Ireland operates a generous immigration and residency policy. In contrast, there are indications that Irish immigration policy in certain respects is more benign to specific nationalities, as evidenced by the granting of Irish working visas and work authorizations mainly to citizens of EEC countries. This aside, the proposed Immigration and Residency Bill (2005) which demonstrates Ireland’s determination to further circumscribe immigrants’ rights and opportunities, is framed with an economic logic based on the economic benefit it would bring to the country, apart from being favorably biased to

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1 Previous working visas/work authorizations for employment in Ireland were granted mostly to EEC/Swiss nationals and few others from other countries (MacEinri and Walley 2003, 24).
certain categories of individuals. For example, some concession for permanent migration into Ireland has been considered for those immigrants (with their families) that possess rare but needed skills, special qualifications and experience. Minister McDowell reinforced this economic imperative when he stated that Ireland was “in competition with other economies for go-ahead people with experience or qualifications that are in short supply at home”, and that “immigration policies are first and foremost about what is best for Irish society” (Ibid). What this suggests is that those unskilled migrants, many of whom are Africans and Asians, are put in very grave danger of exclusion from society.

Besides, the Bill is believed to help the country maintain individual safety and national security as well as control migration flows, safeguard human rights and give the Gardaí extreme power to stop and search individuals suspected to be non-nationals. This seems worrying, for the reason that in countries where the police are granted such an authority, as in the UK, America, etc., Blacks and other ‘visible immigrant minorities’ experience persecution in terms of arbitrary raids, arrests, physical abuses, imprisonments and deportations (Ejorh 2007).

As a matter of fact, Ireland’s current citizenship framework is premised on the EU citizenship agenda that largely seeks to promote and protect the European identity in the face of globalization increasingly threatening the authority of modern nation-states and eroding the integrity of primordial identities (Castles and Daividson 2000). This is why current Irish citizenship policy has been considered an attempt to safeguard Irishness against the threats of *multiculture* supposedly caused by current in-migrations (Lentin 2003). It is on this basis that the new citizenship regime is deemed exclusionary and selective.

Prior to 1 January 2005, Irish citizenship or nationality had been based on the right of birth in the state. Previous laws on citizenship and immigration were successively altered for political expediencies (Lentin 2003; Luibhéid 2003) in tow with what Avtar Brah (1992) has described as heavily bounded and racialized European immigration measures. Thus the practice of territorial citizenship changed with the insertion of a new clause into Article 9 of the Irish Constitution (as amended 24 June 2004), which provides that a child born in Ireland of non-national parents is no longer entitled to automatic right to citizenship. Before such a child can qualify for
citizenship, either of its parents must have a permanent or legal residence in the state for a certain number of years.

**Gender and Race Concerns**

It is important here to examine the debate surrounding these developments. The problem fundamentally centred on childbearing involving asylum seeker women, in particular those from Africa. The Irish state had claimed that non-nationals were occupying beds in Dublin’s maternity hospitals, and as a result were putting maternity services under severe pressure. This aside, the state also alleged that some of these women arrived unannounced in the maternities even when their previous medical histories were unknown, thus endangering both their lives and those of their unborn babies. However, the authorities acknowledged their inability to prevent the inflow of these migrant women, most of whom came as asylum seekers under the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees. Therefore, the best and only way to confront the problem was to “address the incentive” that attracted them to the country, which was believed to be Ireland’s “generous” and porous immigration, citizenship and welfare policies (Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 2004; Irish Nationality and Citizenship Bill 2004; also Ejorh 2007).

Some commentators interpreted these developments along gender and racial lines. Luibhéid (2003), for instance, explained that the general feeling was a particular tendency to blame the immigrant ‘Other’ for societal problems and institutional failures. In the Irish case, the discourse constructed African child bearing asylum seeker women as the cause of the supposed loss of national sovereignty (www.immigrantcontrol.org). Lentin (2003, p. 72) situates the development within a racial logic, describing gender as an important factor in the formation of racial states that are opposed to “mixed race miscegenation, for fear of degeneracy and pollution.” This is particularly striking. For instance, the proposed Immigration and Residency Bill (2005), gives the Minister for Justice the right to approve or refuse marriage contracts between non-nationals and Irish citizens, in a purported bid to combat what are commonly known as “marriages of convenience.” This means that Irish citizens can be denied their constitutional right to decide whom to marry.
Lentin argues that because racial states are incomplete, “they need to reaffirm themselves through population control technologies, usually imposed on women's bodies, prescribing which women are entitled to give birth to the citizens of ‘the nation’.” Relating this thinking to the Irish situation, she wrote:

State responses to the challenges and threats of miscegenation and impurity posed by asylum seeker mothers and their ‘Irish born’ children are determined attempt to control humans in the Irish racial state and perpetuate homogeneity in the face of heterogeneity and ambivalence (2003, p. 74).

African women have been central to the whole reconstitution of citizenship in Ireland and attempts by the state “to draw on existing racial boundaries and create new ones” through re-nationalization measures (Luibhéid 2003, p. 77). Leaning on historical antecedents, Luibhéid notes that African women’s bodies were considerably used as specimens for the study of racial difference. She demonstrates how African women’s bodies were used in western countries to justify racial distinction. In one instance, an African woman, Sarah Bartmann, was on display in England and France between 1810-1815, so that by looking at her buttocks and genitalia, Europeans could confirm scientific claim about the existence of racial difference and hierarchies, “with Africans at the lowest end” (Ibid, citing Fausto-Sterling 2000). Rolston and Shannon (2002) reinforce this historical moment when they confirm in their own account that Sarah Bartmann was on display in freak shows in London and also in Dublin in the nineteenth century.

Luibhéid (2003, p. 10) thus argues that racialized “childbearing discourses and practices” in Ireland have served as a means of reconstructing “racial and national boundaries that have become destabilized.” She contends that such discourses and practices targeting asylum seeker women’s childbearing have provided a means for the Irish Republic to recreate itself as “a sovereign space with a legitimate national government – and also generated new modes of racialization and racial hierarchies” (Ibid). This is why the anti-immigration discourse constructs Ireland as a culturally homogenous and monolithic society, seeing the presence of the immigrant as threatening to this imagined sense of homogeneity. In this way, the
presence of the black African childbearing asylum seeker women was perceived as a challenge to the idea of the sovereignty of the Irish nation-state.

Ireland: A Historically Gendered and Racial State

There is a profusion of literature showing how women in Ireland have historically been marginalized as an underclass. A study by Betty Hilliard (2003), perhaps the first major empirical effort in recent years to analyze the traditional oppression of women in Ireland, confirms this. This longitudinal study analyzed the ideological control of Irish women’s sexuality by the Roman Catholic Church and the subsequent emergence and articulation of individualized thinking that was instigated by what Ulrich Beck (1992) has conceptualized as “reflective modernity.” Hilliard’s study which focused on changes in family habitus2 in Ireland was based on an initial set of about 101 interviews conducted with mothers from “intact families” in 1975 and later in 2000 with re-interviews of 32 women from the original sample.

The study examined the processes of change in the power dynamics between Irish women and the Catholic Church that had constructed and wielded its hegemony of power over its adherents in the matter of sexuality and communication of its dogmas (Ibid, p. 28). The personal narratives of the women exposed what Hilliard described as “the ideological climate during their childbearing years, the impact of this climate on their lives, and their attempts to negotiate a modus vivendi in situations characterized by ignorance, lack of power, lack of support” (Ibid, p. 29). Using an interpretive framework, Hilliard showed that for many Irish women, the period between the 1960s and early 1970s epitomized the height of domination, which they later attributed to “institutional power and control” (Ibid, p. 30). The study showed some kind of complicitous partnership between the Church and the Irish state in this institutionalization of female subjugation in society. As Hilliard noted, “both Church and state were seen in retrospect to have been partners in the exercise of control” (Ibid, p. 31).

2 According to Pierre Bourdieu (1977), the originator of this theory, this is the set of structured cultural dispositions and beliefs that is learned and internalized by individuals through the process of socialization. The habitus of individuals is situated in their history and is embodied in their ideational and existential environment, but is externalized (or lived) in terms of how it determines and influences what choices individuals make and what relationships they maintain.
Reflective of the Foucauldian theory of power, the historical control of women’s lives in Ireland was realized “through active strategies of socialization, which included the instilling of fear, a fear which acted as a powerful control in that it inhibited questioning, let alone dissent” (Ibid). This culture of obligatory silence was also firmly entrenched in other arenas of institutional authority such as the home, school, medical practice, etc.

Thus discussions of matters of sexuality were strictly prohibited, with reprisals handed out to individuals that contravened this regulation (Hilliard 2003). Such dogma stripped Irish women of control over their bodies in relation to matters of fecundity and sexual activities. And because Church power meant clerical power, Irish women found themselves under the control of priests who ensured that they maintained a quiet acquiescence in the face of feminized poverty, domestic violence, child sexual abuse and the emotional distresses that resulted from “unfulfilled relationships” (Ibid, p. 33).

A certain discourse of contradictions has traditionally underpinned this sexual repression of Irish women. For example, while the Church forbade sex and open discussion of it, it prohibited birth control. Hilliard noted that this particular ideological control in matters of sexuality produced grave implications for Irish women, as most of them lacked basic knowledge about fecundity and child delivery procedures. The prohibition of birth control also resulted in the production of many babies, placing heavy burden on families. In very many such cases, Irish mothers had to sacrifice their own needs to satisfy those of their husband’s and children first.

The pre-1970s Ireland would always provoke vivid memories of indignities suffered by women in Irish society. Alpha Connelly (1993, p. 1) describes this society as one in which the “peripheralization” and “silencing of women’s voices in all areas of human endeavour and experience” held sway. In the Foucauldian sense (1975), this Irish society of the pre-Celtic Tiger years was a panopticised society where religious and state technologies of control had been constructed and institutionalized to keep women’s lives and behaviours under perpetual surveillance.

However, Hilliard (2003) noted that Irish women experienced an awakening that was engendered by the new social movements that sought to subvert Church and state authority that had horded women onto the periphery of society, thus
making them second-class citizens. In an earlier study, Yvonne Galligan (1998) made reference to this “second-order citizenship” of Irish women before the 1970s, showing, however, how the new feminist movement of this period hugely inspired the mobilization of Irish women and women interests groups for social and political change.

The issue of identity has always dogged Irish history. The literature also shows how religion, a very volatile issue in Ireland (North and South), has always been invoked in the interpretation of the Irish national identity and the construction of belonging. As Inglis (1998) and Hilliard (2003) showed, ethnic-nationalism in Ireland had been epitomized by the Catholic faith and its elevation both to a state religion and a symbol and bearer of the Irish national identity. Fanning (2007, p. 13) recalls that this monopolization of morality fostered “an ethnic nationalism rooted in the Catholic Church.” The religious temper that marked the Irish independence, he affirms, “reflected a Catholic conception of belonging”, a thinking that permeated the fabric of society and inspired anti-Protestant and anti-Semitic sentiments and encouraged the exclusion and marginalization of individuals that held other religious loyalties.

Religion had also featured very prominently in the propagation of Irish national identity and cultural interests or hegemony abroad. This was evident in Africa both in the colonial and post-colonial eras where, because of the significant influence of Irish missionaries in the region, members of the Irish Diaspora were associated or identified either with Catholicism or Protestantism. Although Ireland did not colonize any country in Africa in the political sense, it did spiritually and culturally through the introduction of a new way of thinking that eroded the foundation of traditional values. Through the corporate alliance of its church missionaries with Europe’s colonial project, Ireland was significantly part of the western empire that colonized Africa. Thus beneath the veneer of a proselytizing church mission lay a motive that manifested in the promotion of a racist and racial hegemony (Ejorh 2007).

However, as the authority of the Catholic Church declined (Inglis 1998) and the Protestant faiths remained stable, there was a shift in the construction of belonging and identity in Ireland from one based on a monolithic institutionalized
religious order to a dichotomization of Irish “social and institutional histories and structures” into a Catholic-Protestant fault-line (Feldman 2003). Such a rigid categorization, Feldman argues, dims the increasing racial (my emphasis), ethnic and religious heterogeneity that current trends of in-migration have occasioned, while at both institutional and academic levels, it has encouraged negative administrative policies and practices and “missed opportunities” (Ibid, p. 2).

Implications

The new model of belonging in Ireland has created some significant classificatory metaphors such as “native-born”, “foreign-born citizen”, “foreigner” and “non-citizen”, by which society is bifurcated along racialized and ethnicized fault-lines. Grieco (2002) comments that such appellations have become ways of constructing or defining the character of belonging to the modern nation-state. In the Irish jus sanguinis (right of blood) system, ethnicity, descent and heritage are definitive markers of belonging. Here the question is whether the individual concerned can trace their ancestral link back to the original country. Going by this, the terms “native-born” and “foreign-born citizen” are used to describe individuals who can establish their bloodline to the original country, while the word “foreigner” is applied to those who cannot trace their ancestry back to the host country (Ibid).

Also while it is easy for “foreign-born” ethnics to be granted automatic citizenship on return to Ireland even though their parents or grandparents have never lived here, resident “foreigners” can only naturalize as citizens if they meet certain, often difficult and elusive, criteria (Grieco 2002; also Irish Nationality and Citizenship Bill 2004). In the previous jus soli (right of soil) context, while individuals born in the island of Ireland were granted automatic citizenship, those born outside the country (excepting foreign-born ethnics) were non-citizens. However, “foreigners” could attain Irish citizenship, as in the current regime, if they met defined criteria. For this reason, the boundaries between jus soli and jus sanguinis in Ireland and most other countries are blurred (Grieco 2002; Castles and Davidson 2000).

In this way, notions of nationality and ancestry bifurcate the Irish society into two distinct categories of individuals: nationals who are qualified for citizenship on
the ground of their heritage and “non-nationals” who must strive to earn their right to belong through naturalization. Ursula Frazer (2003, pp. 6-7) has derided this regime of belonging, describing it as “a policy of first and second class-class citizenship.” For Lentin (2003, p. 71), such classificatory schemes besides being aimed to impose order and control, have racist underpinnings, since the modern nation-state “is about keeping racialized others out.” Such classifications can also be invoked in the determination of the state’s policy of inclusion in terms of who belongs and who does not, as well as in the formulation of administrative policies relating to political participation and access to economic and social opportunities (Grieco 2002; Castles and Davidson 2000; Ottonelli 2002).

Other implications of the new Irish citizenship regime have been cited as the inferiorization of the ‘non-national’, increased inequality, reduction of protection for particular categories of children born in Ireland and the restriction of their constitutional rights to equality and self-determination (ICI 2004; CADIC 2004).

In addition, the current regime of belonging has other serious implications for the security of minoritized immigrant communities. For example, despite official promise to the contrary following the January 2003 Supreme Court decision in the Lobe and Osayande3 cases, a spate of deportations of foreign nationals had been reported, stirring up feelings of fear and insecurity amongst sections of the immigrant community (Ejorh 2006). In a study, Casey and O’Connell (2000, p. 31) reported that Black and Asian migrants, in particular, experienced various forms of racism in the Irish state. The report stated that Black migrants experienced the most racial discrimination with a huge 60% of incidents reported, while Asians were equally vulnerable to racism with about 50% of reported cases. Earlier, Shalini Sinha (1998) had commented that the racialization of the Irish identity largely manifested in the traditional exclusion of immigrants, Black Irish, Jews, Travellers and Muslims as Irish.

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3 On 23 January 2003, in a case brought against the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform by the Lobe (Czech) and Osayande (Nigerian) families, the Irish Supreme Court ruled that non-national parents of Irish-citizen children would no longer enjoy the almost automatic residency rights in the state. Immediately after the ruling, Justice Minister, Michael MacDowell, had promised that there would be no mass deportations of immigrants (ICCL 2003).
Inclusive citizenship and participation

Traditional understandings of citizenship consider participation an important element of modern democratic governance (Gaventa 2004), but in reality they tend to limit the scope of individual engagements or fail to recognize the contributions of individuals who are constructed and alienated from society as ‘non-citizens’.

Alternative thoughts, however, have shaped and informed modern notions of participation. Andrea Cornwall (2002, p. 50) views the liberal construct of participation as a failed model that has created the demands among ordinary members of society for “recognition and voice”, resulting in the creation of alternative spaces that unite various kinds of publics. Like Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of fields, spaces here refer to the loci of struggle for resources or “arenas of governance” where views, opinions and ideas compete for attention.

Going by this line of thinking, John Gaventa (2004, p. 24) sees participation as the process through which subordinate groups articulate their voice “through new forms of inclusion, consultation and/or mobilization” to bring about institutional and policy change. Thus radical scholars now tend to redefine citizenship as “practiced rather than as given” from above (Ibid, p. 29). It is on this basis that minority groups in society claim or create their own “organic” spaces through which they can express their voice (Cornwall 2002). According to Cornwall, these organic spaces are created out of “popular mobilizations”, common interest and common purpose on the basis of identity or issue-related matters (quoted in Gaventa 2004, p.35). Gaventa also suggests that marginal groups mobilize and create spaces for their participation in society largely because mainstream spaces are either foreclosed to them or they only participate in them strictly on invitation.

The African Community and Civic Participation in Ireland

There is evidence that, in spite of strategic measures and institutional attempts to limit the rights and opportunities of sections of the immigrant community in Ireland, large numbers of people from the African immigrant community are actively involved in various civic endeavours in Irish society. A recent study (Ejorh 2006) bears this out.
The first empirical effort to focus on the civic participation of an immigrant minority community in Ireland, the study revealed attempts by African immigrants and African community-led organizations to subvert Ireland’s current neo-liberal notion, policy and practice of citizenship as well as the hegemony of the modern nation-state in matters of belonging and participation. Conceived by the Africa Centre, a leading and well-established African-led voluntary organization in Dublin, the study was instigated by the desire to demonstrate how and whether Ireland’s growing immigrant communities could be more active in society if they enjoyed better opportunities and acquired a voice that would enable them create greater spaces for participation.

The research rose above the usual institutional, organizational and academic preoccupation with matters of arrival, settlement, provision and integration, by focusing on how marginalized immigrant communities were being incorporated or incorporating themselves through active participation in civic life. Thus the study sought to show how African immigrants understood active citizenship, how they participated in civic life and the challenges they faced in their efforts to be active members of Irish society. The survey was conducted in three key locations – Dublin, Waterford and Dundalk – with participants drawn from 14 different African countries.

Results of the study revealed varied understandings of civic participation in the African community. For example, some individuals understood participation in civic life as being politically active; a second group of respondents understood it as a form of grassroots participation, in terms of being active in one’s local community; while a third group considered it as involving forms of grassroots interpersonal relations, that is, the forging of social capital among individuals living in a given community. These three understandings foregrounded one particular element of an active civic life: the promotion of the collective good. The following response by one interviewee is particularly instructive:

When I hear the term civic participation, I think about people taking part in the affairs of their community, to help it grow socially, culturally, politically, economically and morally. It’s like you’re giving what you have for the benefit of everyone (Ejorh 2006, p. 20).
Thus, performing their citizenship at the grassroots, about 63% of African immigrants engaged in activities in their local communities, such as caring for the elderly and people with disabilities, participating in religious and faith-based activities, participating in cultural awareness programmes and entertainment and sports. Similarly, about 68% of Africans had participated in the activities of voluntary sector organizations, either as volunteers, board members, interns, associate members, paid staff or participants in seminars, conferences, workshops, training programmes, etc. In contrast, 12% of respondents were politically active; only 2% belonged to a political party or association; while 27% of interviewees had voted in elections. Findings, however, indicated that many African immigrants were ignorant of their eligibility to vote in some elections, such as those at the local level. For example, some asylum seekers believed that the Irish electoral law excluded them from voting in all elections. In reality, Irish law allowed non-citizens, asylum seekers included, to vote in local elections subject to a mandatory six-month residency requirement, whereas only citizens could vote in all levels (Whelan 2000). Similarly, a resident in Ireland needed not be a citizen to be elected as a public representative (Irish Electoral Act No 23/1992).

Participants in the survey cited several obstacles to their efforts to be civically active in society. They included the following: racism, intolerance and absence of a proper policy of inclusion; a lack of information and civic education programmes; language barrier and the sense of insecurity and fear due to the problem of normalization of residency. However, these problems may not be peculiar to the African community, but are such that affect the broad diversity of immigrant/minority communities and groups in Ireland.

To address the foregoing problems, participants suggested, inter alia, that Irish government introduced stricter measures against racism and intolerance and to encourage the active participation of all members of Irish society irrespective of differences in their backgrounds or identities. Although, the setting up of an Active Citizenship Task Force by the government was extolled, the exclusion of members of the immigrant community from the 20-member committee was considered racist and a denial of the importance and contributions of immigrants to the development of
Irish society. Respondents also proposed that free language trainings be provided for non-English speaking migrants. This aside, Irish political parties, it was suggested, should create opportunities for the admission of more immigrants and minoritized groups while a national consultative forum should be established to deliberate matters affecting the situations of immigrant/minority ethnic communities in the country.

Conclusion

Historically, Ireland is a country where division and alienation have thrived. Gender and religion have traditionally been invoked in the bifurcation of Irish society. Even in the current experience of in-migration into the country, division and exclusion continue to fester along gender, racial, ethnic and religious fault-lines. This is amply confirmed by the series of tough measures churned out by the Irish state to stem current migrations into the country and also curtail immigrants’ opportunities and rights to attain regular residency status and citizenship. Thus, as new immigration, residency and citizenship laws are enacted, social, political and economic opportunities become increasingly limited for large numbers of immigrants, such as the African community. However, African immigrants and their various community-led organizations are gradually mobilizing in a way that subverts the authority of the Irish nation-state in determining matters of belonging. They are thus creating a voice and an organic space through which they can realize their dream of inclusion and practice their own citizenship, that is, from the grassroots.

References


