The few writings on African immigrants in Ireland have failed to examine the historical link between Ireland and Africa and how it informs current trends of African migration into the country. On reflection, it is hard to ignore the compelling influence that Ireland has exerted over Africa. The link between the two dates back to the nineteenth century, when Europe colonized Africa. Until then, the region had consisted of autonomous ethnic nationalities, with distinct social and political sensibility that defined and gave meaning to their existence.

Although Ireland did not colonise any country in Africa or elsewhere in the official sense (itself being a satellite of the British metropolis), the Irish nation through its church missionaries was considered a part of the purported western ‘civilizing mission’ in Africa. Unarguably, Irish missionaries left a ‘historical legacy’ over time in the region and this Irish Diaspora was part of the new European consciousness that introduced drastic changes to the traditional sensibility of communities where it manifested its presence.

Africans esteemed the Irish. This was why important institutions and communal landmarks were named after Irish personages. An excursion to Southern Nigeria, for instance, will reveal streets, schools, colleges, hospitals and churches named to celebrate the work of Irish missionaries in the area. Similar naming in celebration of Irish people occurred in other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Other than Missionaries, a large Irish population of economic migrants had settled in sub-Saharan Africa during the nineteenth century. In South Africa, a favoured destination, the Irish were keenly involved in “the military, the management of imperialism, and the spread of the capitalist economy.” Other evidence shows that this non-missionary Irish population “came to join an occupational, cultural, and racial elite.” The enduring connection between Ireland and Africa is further
evinced by the study of Irish literature in African educational institutions. For example, the writings of Irish literary legends, such as Yeats, Beckett, Goldsmith, Swift and Joyce, are popular texts in African education today. Somewhat like Africa the Irish colonial dilemma also reflected in the bitter and painful struggles in politics and literature for liberation from colonial control. The question of slavery aside, this experience correlated with African colonial and post-colonial struggles.

In the economic sector, Ireland’s ties with Africa are strong. Apart from bilateral economic relations between Ireland and African countries, Irish private investments in the region are significant. Diageo Africa, the African branch of Diageo Ireland, brewers of Guinness and the world’s largest producers of beer, spirits and wines, operates in as many as twenty Africa countries. While Nigeria is Guinness’s third largest market in the world, three other African countries – Ghana, Cameroun and Kenya – are among the world’s top ten. Africans consume about one-third of Guinness’s total world’s production, three times greater than the total North American consumption.

Ireland’s development programmes in Africa are significant. The Irish government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) contribute financial aid, medical and humanitarian initiatives, voluntary and church missionary work to different African countries. Irish international NGOs like Concern, GOAL, Trócaire, Christian Aid Ireland and Self Help Development International (SHDI) run different development projects in the region.

Nevertheless, unlike Ireland, Africa remains embattled. The current debacle and insecurity in the continent recently inspired a controversial article by John Coulter in which he called for a re-colonization of African nations by countries he called Europe’s ‘Gang of Five’, namely Britain, Germany, France, Russia and Ireland. He justified his proposal on the ground that Africa had failed to sustain the gains of western colonialism, descending rather into a “disease-ridden, famine-smitten, war-torn, politically-corrupt continent”. Though Africa’s current dilemma seems critical, Coulter’s proposal is unwarranted, if not racist. It is crucial instead to tackle the root causes of the troubles in the region and also address the problem
of exclusion and discrimination experienced by African immigrants in Ireland and other destination countries.

**African Migrations to Ireland**

Africans had maintained a presence in Ireland long before the Celtic Tiger miracle. Extant evidence suggests that Africans have lived in Ireland since the 18th Century and most of the earliest migrants were soldiers and drummers that had been drafted into the British 29th Military Regiment based in Dublin since 1757. There were also others like domestic servants and African freed slaves from America that had come to Ireland to muster support for the abolitionist campaign.

However, a new African Diaspora has emerged in Ireland, and this is distinct from earlier forced shipments of black Africans into slavery in Europe, Asia and America. Changing global trends and relationships and social, economic and political crises in the region serve as stimuli for this new wave of migrations. There is also the language affinity between Ireland and many African countries. English is Ireland’s most spoken language and the language of bureaucracy and this fact motivates many English-speaking Africans to come to Ireland. Migration scholars argue that people will most likely immigrate to destinations where the same language is spoken as in their home countries.

The foregoing diverges with the common feeling in Ireland that its soft immigration and citizenship policy and its liberal welfare system attract large numbers of immigrants – many of whom have often been labelled ‘bogus asylum seekers’ and ‘citizenship shoppers’. In contrast, many Africans that have immigrated to Ireland in the Post-World War II years had either lived in the UK or have acquaintances and relatives there. Such connections have served as necessary yarns for the weaving of transnational networks that later aided eventual movements to Ireland.

However, while many African immigrants might have found the economic and political security in Ireland appealing in the sense that the country provides them immense opportunities to attain their full potential, a large number of others come to the country mainly to study. These are mostly individuals from wealthy
and middle-class families in their home countries many of who return home at the end of their study\textsuperscript{14}. The truth is that in less developed countries it is mostly individuals from affluent and middle class backgrounds that can afford the high costs of international migrations compared to those in the lowest rungs of society.

**Exclusion and Active Citizenship**

Studies on the experiences of African immigrants in Ireland\textsuperscript{15} reveal a peripheral people groping for admission into the hub of society. Much has been written about the general sense of unease within the immigrant community due to bad representations, stereotyping, indeed outright racist and xenophobic outrage among sections of the Irish media. Also efforts by the Irish state have lately shifted towards the introduction of stricter policies that limit the rights and opportunities of sections of the immigrant population for inclusion and participation in society.

Ireland is fast pedalling in its agenda of curtailing immigrants’ rights. Beginning with the Supreme Court ruling of 23 January 2003 that stripped non-national parents automatic qualification for residency in the state on the basis of having Irish citizen children, there followed the insertion of a new clause into Article 9 of the Irish Constitution (as amended 24 June 2004) which provides that any person born in Ireland is only entitled to Irish citizenship if at least one parent is an Irish citizen. It was argued that non-nationals were increasingly taking up beds in Dublin’s maternity hospitals, putting maternity services under immense pressure. It was also claimed that many non-national women in advanced stages of pregnancy and about whom there were no previous pregnancy or health history, arrived unannounced in the maternities, putting both them and their children in great danger. The Irish authorities admitted that they could not check the inflow of migrant women simply through immigration controls, as most of them sought asylum under the 1951 Geneva Convention. So, the best way to tackle the problem was to “address the incentive” that motivated them to undertake the journey at all. This incentive was supposedly Ireland’s generous immigration and citizenship policies\textsuperscript{16}. 
These developments have huge implications for Irish society. According to the Immigrant Council of Ireland\textsuperscript{17}, they have created two classes of children in the country: those classified as citizens and others represented as non-citizens (therefore, as \textit{persona non grata}). This has placed parents of such non-citizen children in great difficulty in terms of limiting their access to available opportunities as well as their full participation in society. Unarguably, immigrant minorities such as Africans may be worst affected by these developments. This is because Africans are traditionally potential targets of direct and structural discrimination in Ireland on the ground of race, ethnicity and nationality, despite this behaviour being outlawed by government. Similarly, the proposed new Immigration and Residency Bill that is believed would help to maintain safety and security, manage migration flows, protect human rights and also empower the Gardai to stop and search individuals suspected to be non-nationals, poses potential danger for African immigrants. In countries where the police are given such mandate, people of colour or ‘visible minorities’ are the most targets and victims of arbitrary raids, arrests, deportations and several other forms of human rights abuse. The new dispensation is worrying and disturbing, as it will tend to further maroon African immigrant minorities to the lowest periphery of society\textsuperscript{18}.

**Active Citizenship and Integration of African Immigrants**

The question now is: how can African immigrants attain social inclusion in Ireland? My recent study\textsuperscript{19} on the participation of African immigrants in Irish civic society examined the prospects that exist for the African community for attaining inclusive citizenship. Inclusive citizenship here means having the rights and opportunities for active participation in society, a condition that transcends nationalistic, ethnic, racial and ideological chauvinism. This contrasts with the common and exclusionary sense of citizenship that is limited to holders of a country’s passport and thus devalues immigrants through various forms of discrimination and human rights violations. With active citizenship individuals are incorporated into society irrespective of their background, status and orientation. It is a citizenship based on equality, social justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity\textsuperscript{20}. 


The study was inspired by the necessity to demonstrate that in spite of current worrying legislation and manifestations of resentments, Ireland’s new communities could participate actively in civic society if they had opportunities, acquired a voice and generated spaces for greater engagements in social life. The project specifically set out to: (i) determine how African immigrants in Ireland understood the concept and practices of active citizenship (ii) determine how African immigrants participated in civic activities and their levels of involvement (iii) determine the difficulties and challenges African immigrants faced in Irish civic life. Conducted in three locations, namely Dublin, Dundalk and Waterford, the survey samples consisted of individuals drawn from fourteen African countries.

The study revealed that understandings of civic participation varied among Africans. Some individuals viewed civic participation as synonymous with political activities such as engaging in political debates, electioneering campaigns, or largely a matter of suffrage (i.e. the right to vote in public elections). Yet, other individuals understood it more broadly as consisting of a wide range of community actions and interactions in given localities. Results showed that 63% of the respondents had participated in various local activities, while the remaining 37% had never. Forms of local community participation included: care for the elderly and people with disabilities; involvement in religious and faith-based activities; cultural awareness activities; and sports and entertainment. Some obstacles to participation were cited as: work and family commitments, racism and lack of information about community activities. Results indicated that among those interviewed, 68% had been involved in third sector activities, while the remaining 32% had never been involved.

Participation in political activities and public forums were key issues in the study. Results indicated that a much greater number of people (88%) had never participated in political activities in Ireland while only 12% had been politically active. Inadequate information about matters of politics, lack of time for political activities or sheer lack of political interests were given as reasons for non-involvement in political activities. Also, though a great many desired to be politically active, a vast majority (about 98%) held no memberships of any political
associations. Only about 2% were members of political groups. Similarly, results showed that only 27% of the samples surveyed voted in the 2004 local and European elections, while a huge 73% did not. Explanations for non-participation in the elections showed that: (i) 40% had no residency permit (ii) 30% did not register for voting (iii) 17% were simply not interested in voting (iv) 7% did not vote because, as asylum seekers, they thought they were not qualified to participate in elections. However, under Irish law non-citizens – including asylum seekers - are entitled to register to vote in local government elections subject to a six-month residency rule, while only citizens can vote in national and European parliamentary elections\textsuperscript{21} Furthermore, in local government elections it is not necessary to be an Irish citizen to be elected as a public representative\textsuperscript{22}

Participants reported a number of difficulties in their efforts to become civically active. Some of these problems reflected common situations, such as racism, intolerance, lack of inclusion, lack of information about civic education, language barrier; problem of residency and increased sense of insecurity.

Consequently, the participants suggested that government should step up efforts to tackle racism and intolerance and promote active citizenship. Although government’s recent move in setting up a task force on active citizenship was lauded, the non-representation of immigrant/ethnic minority communities in this 20-member strong body was considered somewhat worrying. Some felt this gesture amounted to a tacit denial of the relevance and contributions of the immigrant community in Irish society as well as a negation of the multicultural sensibilities of a 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Ireland. Against this backdrop, some suggested that any future citizenship framework should consider redefining the meaning of citizenship in inclusive terms to embrace increased opportunities for both non-holders of the Irish passport and non-regularized immigrants so that they could participate and contribute to civic society on equal footing.

Other suggestions included: providing more opportunities for immigrant/minority participation in mainstream politics; setting up civic education programmes to stimulate greater civic awareness among immigrant/ethnic minority groups; language training; and the establishment of a national consultative forum to
compose of representatives of the immigrant/ethnic minority community, statutory agencies, the third sector and religious bodies. The Forum should be responsible for consultations on issues affecting immigrant/ethnic minority situations in the country.

It has been shown how Ireland’s historical link with Africa shapes current African migrations to the country. Also, despite current legislative measures to limit immigrants’ rights, members of the African community hunger to participate actively in Irish society and contribute to its continued development. However, with proper inclusive policy mechanisms African immigrants and other immigrant minorities would participate more actively in Irish society.

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Notes


5 Ibid McIndoe.


8 Ibid.


The category of persons entitled to vote in the local elections in Ireland is broader than those which apply to any other poll. There are no citizenship requirements and any national of any country ordinarily resident in the local electoral area, who is over 18 and is on the register, is entitled to vote [Whelan, N. (2000) Politics, elections and the law. Dublin: Blackhall].