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Active Civic Participation among Sub-Saharan Africans in Europe. Transcultural Capital and Transcultural Community Building

Anna Triandafyllidou

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that immigrant civic activism which may at first glance seem to focus on diasporic ties and ethnic community building, becomes often a lever for transcultural capital and transcultural community building. The study is explorative of new repertoires and forms of transnationalism among sub Saharan African immigrant activists in Europe. The findings suggest that immigrant civic activism even if limited in size proposes new types of transcultural societal networks and new forms of transcultural expression. In the first part of the study I discuss the theoretical background of transnationalism in migration studies and propose the notions of transcultural capital and transcultural community as working concepts. The second part of the study concentrates on the qualitative analysis of life story interviews with sixteen sub Saharan African immigrants in Europe.

Keywords: migration, transnationalism, civic activism, social capital, Europe, Africa.

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1. Introduction

There is a wealth of literature discussing immigrant civic and political activism, especially in European countries with a long experience as receiving societies, like the Netherlands and Germany (for an overview, see Cyrus and Vogel 2005; ter Wal 2007). A question frequently investigated in these studies is whether immigrant activism contributes to immigrant integration in the country of settlement or whether it is mainly ethnic community oriented, concerned with immigrant problems only and/or geared towards homeland politics and issues. The scholarly and often the policy debate concentrates on the country of origin vs. country of settlement dilemma. It is my contention that the dominance of this dilemma reflects a problem of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). A more fruitful approach would be to look at the ways in which immigrant civic or political engagement contributes to new types of social and cultural capital (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006) and to new forms of community building.

In this paper, I argue that immigrant civic activism which may at first glance seem to focus on diasporic ties and ethnic community building, becomes often a lever for the development of transcultural capital and the building of transcultural communities. The bi-focal attachment to the country of origin and the country of settlement gives rise to transcultural narratives that immigrant activists adopt to make sense of themselves and of their civic activism in the country of settlement. The migrant activist presents her/himself as somebody with fluency in two cultural idioms, feeling at home in both the society of origin and that of settlement, and promotes this transcultural quality of hers/his as a form of transcultural capital. These transcultural

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repertoires may originate initially from external categorizations (the foreigner, the outsider, the different) that are later internalized and transformed into a new layer of identity (the pivotal person, the transcultural community builder). Such repertoires are embedded in the power relations of the country of settlement. The quality of being an immigrant is transformed from a disadvantaged position (someone who does not belong) to an asset (someone who has fluency in different cultural or linguistic idioms and who has social networks both *here*, in the country of settlement, and *there*, in the country of origin).

For the purposes of this study I propose the following definition of the terms transcultural capital and transcultural community. Transcultural capital involves the strategic use of knowledge, skills, and networks acquired by migrants through connections with their country and cultures of origin which are made active at their new places of residence. The notion of transcultural community is proposed to make sense of the informants' accounts of the community-building aspects of their civic activism. I use the term transcultural instead of transnational to point to the fact that the immigrants' discourses and actions need not involve more than one countries but may involve people of different nationalities (e.g. Nigerian immigrants and Slovenian natives), or people of the same nationality but of different cultural affiliations (e.g. native Portuguese and Angolan Portuguese).

I have chosen the case of sub-Saharan Africans to illustrate how immigrant civic activism develops in and through transcultural capital and community building for a number of reasons. First, because several among the sub-Saharan African informants of this study used the categorical distinction between Africa and Europe (African/*our* culture, European/Western culture). Second, because sub-Saharan African immigrants in Europe tend to be subsumed under the 'black' race category

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imposing thus on them a common pan-African categorisation. In the case of our interviewees, this pan-African dimension is turned on its head and the racial disadvantage and prejudice faced by our informants is transformed into (trans)cultural capital. The interviews analysed here include seven different countries of origin (Angola, Burundi, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissao, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Somalia) and seven countries of settlement (Finland, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia).

Although the informants were recruited on the basis of their civic activism, their demographic and socio-economic profile suggests that they belong to an immigrant elite (see table 1): all of them came to the country of settlement to study or as internal movers within a colonial regime (Angolans in Portugal). They are perfectly integrated in that they have been established in the country of settlement for over 15 years, have raised families (several are married with natives) and have naturalised. This type of human and social capital appears a necessary even if not satisfactory condition for developing transcultural capital and aspiring towards building a transcultural community.

Table 1 about here

This study investigates whether immigrant civic activism even if limited in size compared to natives' civic activism (Triandafyllidou and Vogel 2006) may become a form of revitalization of citizen participation in public life because it proposes new types of cultural expression and community building (see also Putnam 2000). The study is qualitative in nature. I try to gain a better insight into the meanings involved in immigrant transcultural civic activism through the analysis of

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the informants' ways of speaking, their selection and narrativisation of their experiences and their own ways of making sense of their lives. This construction of meaning however is considered important in that it can provide for new dimensions for transcultural identification not only for elites but also for first and second generation immirant youth in that it captures the fluid and dynamic nature of European societies and migrant populations in the twenty first century.

In the following section I discuss briefly the two main approaches to migrant transnationalism (diaspora nationalism and cosmopolitanism) and introduce my working definitions of transcultural capital and transcultural community. The third section presents the methodology and data used in this study. Section four concentrates on the analysis of the interviews. In the concluding section the relevance of the findings of this study for further research on immigrant activism and transnationalism is discussed.

2. Transcultural capital and transcultural community: theoretical reflections

There is a growing literature on immigrant transnationalism focusing not only on the bi-focal position of migrants between two countries and cultures but also on new cultural identities that emerge from the synthesis of the two. Although an overview of this literature goes beyond the scope of this paper, I shall discuss here briefly the two main theoretical perspectives for studying migration-related transnational phenomena: diaspora nationalism and cosmopolitanism (for a more comprehensive discussion see Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006).

Robin Cohen (1997: 2) points to the transformation of the concept of diaspora from the original meaning of a victims' predicament (the biblical reference to the

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scattering of the Jews) to its contemporary use as a way of making sense of cultural difference and identity politics. Currently the diaspora nationalism perspective is based on a national vision of reality assuming that nations and ethnic groups are primary points of reference for both immigrants and natives and hence structure the lives of either as well as their mutual contact. It focuses on the collective realities of diasporas, their institutions and networks, the society and state institutions at the country of origin, paying less attention to internal diversity within diasporas, the ambivalence of the links between immigrants and their country of origin, the possible variation in the practices and views of individual immigrants.

Diaspora nationalism points to the continuing relevance of national identities in the everyday lives of both natives and immigrants. Indeed, immigrant politicians may have a long-distance albeit significant involvement in homeland politics and may have ties to political parties in the country of origin (Itzigsohn 2000; Smith 2003). Emigrant remittances are an important development factor for the economy of the sending country both in terms of supporting the livelihoods of the immigrants' families left behind but also determining the socio-economic and educational prospects of entire communities (Guarnizo 2003). Immigrants, at least the first generation, hold onto the idea of returning to the country of origin and hence aim at maintaining and developing their social and economic position there (Goldring 1998).

Recent research has highlighted the dual nature of diaspora national identity, its status of neither here nor there and its double point of reference: in the country of settlement, usually experienced as actual *home* and the country of origin, often imagined as a *homeland* too but also as often experienced as an *alien* culture and place (Christou 2006). Such ethnographic accounts that highlight the complexity of dual or multiple identifications among immigrants is an element that I wish to retain from this

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perspective. In this paper, I shall highlight how immigrant (diasporic) identity develops in new directions through civic activism and leads to the development of transcultural repertoires that transform the immigrant disadvantage into a new form of transcultural capital.

By contrast to diaspora nationalism perspectives, cosmopolitanism pays more attention to the individual level. For cosmopolitanism group realities are less relevant in a world marked by economic, social and cultural globalization. Immigrants construct their individualized identities out of their social and cultural ties with the country of origin as well as their actual experiences and affiliations in the country of settlement.

The cosmopolitan perspective is predicated on the overall processes of social transformation in the late modern period. Theorists of late or post modernity (for instance Giddens 1991) argued that contemporary individuals may chose from different cultural repertoires that are available to them so as to create their own individualized identities. Migration scholars (Papastergiadis 2000 for instance) have noted the importance of globalisation processes for labour migration phenomena. In this approach, the emphasis is on the individual rather than on the collective reality of a group. Contemporary migrants living in a mobile world of culturally open societies, adapt to multiple social settings and to ethnically mixed contexts, develop cross-cultural competences and no longer have a sense of primary loyalty to one place or community (Pecoud 2004). This is not seen as contradictory to the need of members of transnational networks and communities for 'political stability, economic prosperity and social well-being in their places of residence, just like anybody else' (Castles 2002: 1159).

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In my view, multiple identities are constructed out of a whole range of possibilities made available by the cultural diversity in countries of origin as well as settlement which cannot be retained within narrow conceptions of national cultures as closed containers. In that sense cosmopolitan repertoires are a reality, and especially so in large city environments. But the context in which migrants move very often includes kinship and ethnic networks which cannot be disregarded assuming that individuals are free floating agents in a global world.

Diaspora nationalism and cosmopolitanism offer complementary repertoires of identification for migrants in diverse cultural settings and different every-day life situations. In this paper I take the case of sub-Saharan immigrant activists in Europe – by definition an immigrant elite – to show how they use and combine diasporic and cosmopolitan repertoires in making sense of their actions and experiences. My analysis is organised along two working concepts that have been both inductively and deductively developed: the notion of transcultural capital proposed in the work of Meinhof and Triandafyllidou (2006), and the concept of transcultural community that stems from existing literature on transnational communities.

Meinhof and Triandafyllidou (2006) have coined the term transcultural capital by adapting Bourdieu's well known remark that 'capital presents itself under three fundamental species (each with its own subtypes), namely economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119). The notion of transcultural capital highlights the strategic use of knowledge, skills, networks acquired by migrants through connections with their country and cultures of origin which are made active at their new places of residence. Transcultural capital includes forms of all three types of capital identified by Bourdieu (economic, social and cultural). Meinhof and Triandafyllidou use this notion to analyse ethnographically the

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narratives and everyday life practices of first generation immigrant musicians from francophone Africa living and working in Paris and other major European cities. They examine those artists' strategic possibilities of strong local and transnational ties within and across migrant communities (social capital), of widespread bi- or multilingualism, bi- or multiculturalism (cultural capital), and of retaining vibrant artistic roots in originating cultures but blending these with new local and global influences (transcultural capital combinations).

The notion of transcultural capital is useful to describe and explore the transnational lives of first generation immigrant activists from sub-Saharan Africa who develop ethnic networks within and between the society of settlement and the society of origin, are immersed in the mainstream culture and civic life in the country of settlement and feel ultimately ambivalent or bi/multi-focal in their national and cultural identifications.

Transcultural capital is useful as a theoretical notion in that it seeks to supersede the oppositional discourses of diasporic communities on the one hand and cosmopolitan flows on the other by underlining the potential arising from a repertoire of options drawn from across the spectrum (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006; Castles 2002: 1158). Compared to the term transnational networks or transnational communities as discussed in Portes (1997), the notion of transcultural capital emphasizes the fact that such networks, ties and indeed transnational/transcultural skills that immigrants acquire become a form of social and cultural capital for them. The term differs from the more business-oriented 'transnational capital' defined by Vanhonacker et al. (2005: 1) as 'the value added to one's human capital that accrues from time spent, networks established, and knowledge acquired, overseas,' in that it emphasises the social and cultural skills that become part of one's way of life rather

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than the accrued transnational human capital useful for doing business. Nonetheless, the two terms should be seen as connected, casting light to different aspects of transcultural or transnational capital building: Vanhonacker et al (2005) look into the potential benefits of such capital for returning migrant business people, while this study concentrates on the use of such capital for civic (non-profit) activism in the country of settlement. Naturally, transcultural capital is inter-related with the human and economic capital that people may have. However, the exploration of such links goes beyond the scope of this paper.

The notion of transcultural community is proposed to make sense of the informants' accounts of their networks and the community-building aspects of their civic activism. I use the term transcultural instead of transnational to point to the fact that the immigrants' discourses and actions need not involve more than one countries but may involve people of different nationalities (e.g. Nigerian immigrants and Irish natives), or people of the same nationality but of different cultural affiliations (e.g. native Portuguese and Angolan Portuguese). In agreement with Olwig (2003: 808) I try to avoid methodological nationalism and seek to emphasise how the activities and narratives of my informants point to complex and also ambivalent and fluid patterns of transnational socio-cultural practices. Their activities do not generally involve the crossing of national boundaries although they do involve the crossing of boundaries between cultures and the (potential) overcoming of ethnic and racial markers. The notion of transcultural community points to their actions and discourses bringing together different cultures (not nations) to create a new synthesis. This cultural synthesis of different traditions or artistic forms provides the basis for building a transcultural community.

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The notion of community here is intended in its late modern definition rather than its pre-modern or early modern one. Sub-Saharan African activists in Europe cannot base their ideas of transcultural community on physical proximity with Africa (locality and residence) nor on structural constraints (kinship, religious or customary obligations) as their fellow nationals probably do in their countries of origin. But they can adopt late modern repertoires of community building based on the creation and development of social trust relations (Giddens 1994: 186) and the voluntary involvement of individuals (Lash 1994: 161). Their communities mobilise cultural resources and goals but do not embrace all aspects of life. They may overlap with other community attachments (Beck 2000: 164), they need not command the primary loyalty of their members, and they may change in time (Kennedy and Roudometof 2001: 12-13).

3. Methodology and data

This study is based on sixteen qualitative interviews[1] with sub-Saharan African activists who are first generation immigrants in Europe. For the purposes of this paper, I define civic activities as different forms of political participation and community engagement (such as engaging in local or national politics, participating in cultural associations, migrant lobby organisations or neighbourhood groups, see Triandafyllidou and Vogel 2006 for a discussion) that involve some form of durable participation, and require considerable and continuous effort and time on the part of the activist.

The interviews analysed were conducted by graduate students who are third country nationals living and studying in the EU. In most cases, interviewer and

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interviewee came from the same country and/or spoke the same language. Interviews lasted between 45' and 60'. The transcripts and/or the translated texts have been faithful to the oral conversation. The abbreviations I1, I2,… I16 have been used to protect the anonymity of the interviewees and names of associations and political parties are also omitted where possible. The interviews followed a basic interview guide that helped stir the conversation so as to concentrate on the interviewee's life and activities (socio-economic and demographic profile, how did s/he become active initially, type of first activity, development of the interviewee's civic activism, main conditions or factors that had encouraged or discouraged the interviewee from starting/continuing her/his activities).

The interviews analysed here include seven different countries of origin (Angola, Burundi, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissao, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Somalia) and seven countries of settlement (Finland, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia) (see also table 1 above). These sixteen interviews were selected from a larger set of 30 interviews with sub-Saharan African immigrants that were part of the POLITIS project interview database.[2] The selection process was done manually through reading carefully the interview transcripts of the initial set of 30 interviews with a view to identifying those that included spontaneous references to transnational or transcultural ties and network or community building.

It is worth noting that among the seven countries of settlement where our selected informants are settled, only one is a country with a long past as a migrant receiving country, notably Germany. Three are new immigration countries (Portugal, Ireland and Finland), while another three (Latvia, Slovenia and Malta) are countries that have not yet experienced immigration as hosts, or only to a very limited extent. The absence from our sample of countries like the Netherlands, the UK or Sweden

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(where some among our initial 30 sub-Saharan African interviewees were located) is surprising. Empirical research on transnational activities and identities of immigrants in Europe documents the existence of such phenomena mainly in countries of the latter type (e.g. Britain, France or the Netherlands, see for instance Meinhof and Triandafyllidou, 2006b). This finding indeed raises the question of whether the specific host country or the specific country of origin play a role in fostering the immigrant's transcultural repertoires. This question will be explored qualitatively in the following section of this paper.

3. Transcultural Capital and Transcultural Community Repertoires

In analysing the interviews, I have looked for the ways in which the informants make sense of their transnational/transcultural attachments and activities. Adopting a qualitative discourse analysis perspective, I have examined the informants' use of pronouns like 'I', 'we', 'they' and identified those paragraphs where they elaborated, more or less explicitly, on the relationship between the three. My aim has been to explore how they define the in-group, the 'we' and the out-group, the 'they', whether these definitions change or are ambivalent, how they position the 'I' by reference to the 'we' and the 'they' and whether they consciously construct the 'I' as standing in between or belonging to both the ingroup and the outgroup, or belonging to a different transnational or transcultural identity space that stands in-between. This bottom-up approach has led me to the identification of two main transculturalism repertoires: the *cultural pivots* and the *cultural activists*.

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Cultural Pivots

Some informants (notably interviewees I8, I9, I11 and I12) emphasised their activity and role as those standing at a pivotal position between cultures and societies. They emphasised that they were insiders to both countries but also outsiders in either country, if compared with other natives. They saw themselves as privileged because they had the cultural knowledge and the communication skills necessary to act as channels of communication and exchange, cultural or economic, between the two societies. They emphasised their feeling of belonging to both countries and cultures despite racism or discrimination experienced in the country of settlement. However, they also noted that at times they suffered double exclusion because of their transnational ties, they were aliens everywhere.

Below I cite three excerpts from the interviews with three sub-Saharan African activists, one from Guinea Bissao based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, a Nigerian in Malta and an Angolan in Lisbon, Portugal. The last two have naturalised in the countries of settlement. They all have lived in the destination countries for over fifteen years. The first two are married with natives and only the third with a co-national (i.e. an Angolan). All three have been civically active for many years and are relatively well known public figures in their countries of settlement.

I8 is male, in his late 30s. He comes from Guinea Bissao and has migrated to Slovenia twenty years ago. He migrated to study at the University of Ljubljana and soon became civically active in an international student association of which he soon became president. He later founded another African cultural association. He is in a stable relationship with a Slovenian and has one child.

> I think they [Slovenians] don't see this potential [of migration] at all. I believe everybody only see the negative things. They just don't see the potential and this makes it much harder. [..]

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> They take [migration] as a negative thing. And not something you can use. Or maybe they don't have an idea, because they don't know the immigrants and they don't know other cultures. This is a common obstacle. I think, that any entrepreneur who wishes to be succesful has to be open. I don't see why I wouldn't go to a Slovenian company and say that I'm coming from there and there, I want to help you to export there and let's see what I can do. I don't see the obstacle.
>
> [..] The ones who do not approve of me are more careful when expressing this disapproval. Because they know I know a lot about Slovenian society. I have been here for so long, I speak the language. And I know a lot of things connected with Slovenian culture.. (emphasis added)

I8 distances himself from Slovenians and Slovenian society to which he refers always as 'they', or 'the ones', the 'Slovenian society'. In his narrative there are two out-groups: the Slovenians – both as customers and as suppliers – and the African entrepreneur(s). He does not identify however with the latter either. Rather he constructs a sense of 'we' the people with transcultural skills, who can and are willing to act as cultural links bringing closer Slovenian and African business people. The emphasis in the narrative is in his transcultural capital that is expressed in terms of both inter-cultural communication skills and transnational networks. The informant makes little reference to his economic capital. His emphasis is on his networks and the business opportunities he sees in them rather than his economic capital to start a business. I8 sees himself as embedded in Slovenian society but not part of it.

I9 is also male in his mid 40s. He comes from Nigeria but has acquired Maltese nationality. His spouse is Maltese and they have two children. He initially came to Malta to study. He has now been in the country for sixteen years and is the FIFA representative in Malta and hence is very well known locally. He has also run the European Parliament elections as an independent candidate. He is active in several African organisations in Malta. I9 presents himself as a pivotal person both culturally

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and economically, between Africa and his country of settlement, particularly in relation to football but not only.

> Basically the whole idea of coming out to run [for European Parliamentary elections] was to create an awareness in Malta and far beyond Malta, that, you know, in today's interdependent world, erm it's something which is natural that, we just have to accept that we, we, we live for each other, we have to accept it that people like me do exist in Malta today, I am a citizen, I started to raise a family, I do have every right like you, like every other person to participate in all social you know life, politics, whatever, and that was the main reason why I did come out to speak for, yeah, if you like, the minority people like me to make the, the majority of the Maltese aware that people like us are also now existing in Malta.
>
> [..] I can take you now, we walk in Valletta. You won't believe that I am a black person. You see people coming to shake me, you know sometimes bow for me, shake me with two hands. Yeah, because of what I have in a way established in Malta, these associations, because of football as well, you see me on the newspapers, they know my social and economic standing, that could be one of the reasons why I am you know respected the way I am respected but that is not the same for the as I said the sort of newer immigrants (..) [other immigrants] they melt because they are white as well, even the Russians. (emphasis added)

I9's definitions of the in-group and the out-group are shifting. His narrative positions him as part of the Maltese society, that he defines as an in-group. Contrary to I8 above, I9 identifies as Maltese. But he clarifies that he is a minority within Malta because of his skin colour. His definition of 'minority people like me' refers to 'black' Africans rather than to all immigrants although the statement about race comes a few sentences later. This 'minority' is differentiated from other immigrants who are white and more numerous than sub-Saharan Africans. I9 emphasises his transcultural political activism and his wish to act as a link between cultures and as a transcultural pivot, to make people aware that the world is becoming increasingly

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multi-ethnic and multi-racial. His repertoire of identity and his emphasis on his transcultural social skills may be characterized as individualist and cosmopolitan although references to race remain important.

I12 is male in his early 40s. He is Angolan-Portuguese and so is his wife. They have two children. He has lived in Lisbon for thirty years and is an employee of the Portuguese public administration. He is active as member of several Angolan associations. He is also representative of a Portuguese party in the City of Lisbon's Municipal Assembly and Head of the Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Municipal Council of the City of Lisbon.

> [..] And the tendency will be to grow even more, more Portuguese going to our countries: to Cape Verde, to Guinea, to Mozambique, to Sao Tome, and so on. It's a pity that Portugal has been losing, we'll say, control of integration, even in their own business dealings, because Portugal and the Portuguese are today already seen as a second and third plan in our countries. And that is bad. Why is it bad? Because when I go to Angola, I identify with Portugal. I identify with the Portuguese. Because my children are Portuguese, my wife is Portuguese, because I'm Portuguese. That means it doesn't look good on me, nor do I feel minimally good when it's the Chinese that own the construction sites and public works in Luanda, for example. And I ask, where's Portugal? (..) A lot of times when I arrive in Angola with my family they say to me: Look it's the Portuguese! With a mocking attitude, they no longer call me by my name. So this means, this is to say that a climate is being created that we need to think about today. And we need to think about it in a very serious way. Portugal has people that can help Portugal take a step forward. They are black! It is us! Portugal cannot abandon us. Portugal will need us. Internally it will need us and it will thank us. (emphasis added)

While I8 clearly positions himself as a sub Saharan African in Slovenia but not of Slovenia, I9 identifies with Malta noting that however he is a minority Maltese, I12 adopts an ambivalent identity repertoire. He identifies with Portuguese speaking

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African countries (they are 'our countries' in his narrative) but also states clearly a few sentences later: 'my children are Portuguese, my wife is Portuguese, I am Portuguese'. Similarly to I9 he defines himself as 'black' Portuguese. His narrative emphasises his transcultural capital which includes his personal and family networks as well as his inter-cultural skills and knowledge of both Portugal and Angola. He proposes himself as a pivotal actor between Portugal and Portuguese-speaking African countries, Angola in particular. He offers to use his transnational and transcultural capital and networks to expand the economic and political exchange between his country of origin and his country of settlement.

These three distinct and rich biographies illustrate how transcultural capital is developed and used for economic and political purposes by sub-Saharan African immigrant activists who live in different European countries. The informants highlight their role as transcultural and transnational capital brokers who develop actively networks within and between the country of origin and the country of settlement with a view to improving their own lives but also to contribute to public and civic life in their country of settlement. There is a distinct African dimension in the building of these transcultural networks related to the colour of the skin of the informants (all three note the importance of race in being accepted as full and equal members in the society of settlement). I12 emphasises the colonial relations between Portugal and Angola, while this is not the case for the informants in Slovenia and Malta where past relations between the country of origin (Sierra Leone and Nigeria respectively) and the countries of settlement are non-existent. In those cases, race is the most important marker while in the case of Angola-Portugal race is mediated by the post-colonial legacy that is presented as both an advantage (Portugal should have

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a leading role in investments in Angola) and as a drawback (with a mocking attitude, they say Look here comes the Portuguese).

Informants I8 and I9 frame their role as transcultural capital brokers as a feature of their exceptional position as sub-Saharan Africans settled and successfully integrated in their respective countries of settlement which have no prior experience, nor important historical relationship with the country of origin or with sub-Saharan Africa in general. By contrast, I12 points to the part that he and other people from former colonies can play as pivotal actors between the countries of origin and the country of settlement because of the historical relationship and deep political, economic and cultural ties that exist between the two societies. In other words, while the narratives are personalized, pointing to the individual position and skills of the informants as well as their specific transcultural and transnational experiences, they reflect also the structural historical factors that characterize the relationship between the country of origin and the country of settlement.

Cultural activists

Our sub-Saharan African informants emphasised the role of culture, African folklore, dances and music in particular, as a channel of communication and exchange with the natives in their societies of settlement and as a means for building a sense of transcultural community. Music and theatre or other cultural activities were used as vehicles to promote transcultural activities and networks. These were networks built within the society of settlement to promote knowledge about the country and continent of origin and become a means of *intermingling* as one informant put it.

Informant I8 (Sierra Leonean in Slovenia) has been active in this field:

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> Yes, we have one group that runs parallel with the association… Drums… They perform at different occassions and they play the drums. Dancing… They teach people how to dance African dances. I, for example, four, five years ago invited groups from Senegal. During the 'Trnfest' [a festival organised every year in Ljubljana]...
>
> [..] If we want to start a programme, then we spread the word (..) We go to school and present this and we invite a would-be member to go with us and see how we do it. For instance, I decide I'll talk about traditional African wedding. (..) These are the things that people are interested in. Actually Slovenes want to know what they can find out about other cultures. And if you tell them something different that they already know or are used to, then they are prepared to come and listen. Then they want to see it again. [..] Most of the members [of the association] are Slovene.. (emphasis added)

I8 here identifies with the association he has set up, this is his 'in-group', while Slovenes but also African artists, musicians and other transcultural associations are part of the 'they', the out-group. He constructs his narrative as a cultural activist, somebody who uses his transcultural and transnational networks to promote cultural exchange and also to make sub-Saharan African culture in general (not the culture of his country or region of origin in particular but that of different sub-Saharan countries) known in Slovenia. He emphasises his transcultural activism that brings to existence a transcultural community between Slovenians and sub-Saharan Africans.

I11 is Nigerian, male in his mid-30s. He has lived in Riga, Latvia for 13 years and he is married to a Latvian and has two children. He initially migrated to Latvia to study. He is the founder of an African cultural association but has also been active during his school years in Nigeria.

> Well, you see that [the association] is not basically; is not just about ethnic background really. Because I mean, look at our activities, let's say, and our visit this weekend, I think we had about 70% of people from, who are not Afrolat members and I mean. I mean it had nothing to

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> do with Africa except that we had some sort of cultural activities. It was… is a way of intermingling really. So, yes. I think that for example, when I was at school, I was active in the debating society; for example, I was also a serious member of the Boy Scouts. (..) And I think I found it interesting and if I have the opportunity to continue in that direction, I will still be happy to do that. And in fact I think that the most important thing for me probably (..) is that for the first time I find that I have friends or acquaintances, who share almost the same ideas, who are also socially active, who are also active in the civic society and people, who are encouraging. (..) And I think I'm happy to have these people around me, really in fact, to have people that I don't consider boring, that I find encouraging, that they know what I am doing, people, with whom we can find new areas of cooperation, really. (emphasis added)

Similarly to I8, interviewee I11 emphasises the cultural, intellectual and social aspects of the transcultural activities he is involved in. African culture becomes a mean to an end, the end being both to feel fulfilled as a person, as I11 particularly emphasizes, but also to make one's culture known to the society of settlement and build a new in-group that transcends cultural and national boundaries, bringing together people who are interested in the same forms of cultural expression.

Neither informant distinguishes between their specific country/culture of origin and African culture, writ large. Of course such generalizing categorization is probably due to the way Africa is perceived by people in the countries of settlement, that is categorizing all together sub-Saharan Africa as a common culture and folklore tradition. At the same time sub-Saharan African culture and arts are used on purpose by our informants to build a sense of transcultural community (Not just people I know, but people whom I have met through our various activities. And I think I'm happy to have these people around me) that encompasses both natives and sub-Saharan Africans of different ethnic or national background.

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African culture is an important theme in the interview with another informant who lives in Portugal. I15 is male in his early 50s. He comes from Cape Verde and has lived in Lisbon for over 30 years. He is married to a woman from Sao Tome and has two children. He is a public sector employee, has been active in trade unions and has recently founded the Cape Verdean association. He emphasizes that cultural exchange makes a culture stronger.

> We have to prove through our way of living with our education, with our qualification; show, therefore, that we have a culture that is extremely strong capable of making us stand. Today in Portugal crioulo (the dialect of Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau) is spoken much more, (..) you find gypsies speaking a bit of crioulo, you find Portuguese speaking crioulo, you find Angolans speaking crioulo; therefore, we have a culture that is extremely strong which needs to be valued, needs to be imposed so long as with respect and with dignity and, hence, a culture that is, therefore, able to transpose us into a social integration perspective that is very important for our community.
>
> [..] We are always learning from one another, [..] I feel a partnership either with the Portuguese society or with the African societies or others, other associations of immigrants that are here in Portugal: Moldavians, Ukrainians and Russians are welcome. We need to show that our culture (..) at this time is becoming exposed and we need to be able to give continuation to that, that consistency of matter because it is we are all to gain with that. The Portuguese society will gain with that, we as immigrants will also gain with that, and let us not forget to work with the second generation. (emphasis added)

This interviewee notes the importance of creole culture (*crioulo*), that is the hybrid culture that blends together the former colonies and the mother country. His narrative is transcultural in that it brings together not only sub-Saharan Africans from different Portuguese speaking countries and Portugal but also Eastern European

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immigrants who have settled more recently in the country. The in-group he constructs in his narrative is transnational and transcultural.

The three informants discussed above present their transcultural capital that is specifically (sub-Saharan) African in that it refers to African culture in general. They appeal both to the strength of their culture but also to its role as a means of creating a transcultural community with other immigrants of African or European origin and with natives (Portuguese, Slovenians or Latvians for instance). They propose new forms of cultural expression that bring together different cultural influences and that call for the participation of people from different countries and cultures. They thus build a sense of transcultural community that finds its origin in sub-Saharan Africa but that is formed and experienced in the country of settlement and that embraces and mobilises both immigrants and natives in an open and dynamic way.

4. Concluding Remarks

The aim of this paper has been to show how immigrant civic activism that originally may stem from objectives of ethnic networking, usually analysed through diaspora nationalism approaches, develops into transcultural capital and transcultural community building repertoires. Our findings suggest that immigrants engage consciously and purposefully in transnational modes of behaviour and thinking, combining diasporic and cosmopolitan understandings of their experiences and activities. Immigrant activism assumes forms of advanced transnationalism and transculturalism, involving different cultures within the same state boundaries and engaging with both natives and other immigrant groups. These transcultural activities, exemplified by the case of sub-Saharan Africans in this study, are based on

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transnational livelihoods (Olwig and Sorensen, 2002) rather than on national affiliations. However, this transcultural activism and repertoires are developed by a small segment of elite immigrants – our informants are part of an immigrant elite not only because of their civic activism but also because of their background (they moved to the country to study or as part of a colonial regime) and have integrated perfectly into it (naturalised, married with a native, settled for 15 years). This suggests that transculturalism is linked to individual social capital, perhaps more than in structural conditions in the country of origin or settlement.

The relevance of countries of origin and countries of settlement appears limited in our findings. Actually the specific countries of origin do not play an important part in the immigrants' narratives. On the contrary, emergent forms of Pan-Africanism acquire special significance in the national context and may become even more important as the socio-political space of the European Union becomes increasingly integrated. It is noteworthy though that countries of settlement include none of the traditional host countries of Western Europe. Rather transcultural capital and transcultural community repertoires flourish in new hosts (Portugal) or in countries with very limited immigration such as Latvia or Slovenia. In Portugal, the informants' narratives are impregnated with the legacy of post-colonial relations. In the other countries, the emphasis is on being an 'exception', somebody who is integrated but who is always also seen as 'different' from the 'majority'. Thus, it appears as if the transcultural capital and transcultural community ideas and forms of identity-building are necessary for these informants to create their own place in society. Moreover, in these societies there is probably scope for such repertoires because immigrant integration and an awareness of transnational livelihoods is still very limited among the native population. By contrast, in societies with a long

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experience as hosts, such repertoires are already formalised, institutionalised and leave less room for immigrants' own initiative and improvisation in proposing pan-African transcultural communities and networks.

Although limited in size, immigrant civic activism can be very important for both sending and receiving societies because it opens new channels and new areas of cultural exchange and socio-economic cooperation. It is also important because the new forms of (trans)cultural capital and community developed by immigrant activists may revitalize the civic life of the host countries in novel ways, creating again new opportunities for engagement with public life for natives and immigrants (naturalized citizens or residents) alike.

This study points to new areas of research that combine the study of civic and political activism of immigrants with the investigation of transnationalism. The notions of transcultural capital and transcultural community proposed here as working concepts may be useful tools for further empirical research and for the development of more appropriate analytical categories that capture better the complex realities of international migration in the twenty first century. The connection between human, economic and transcultural capital is one of the aspects that is worth exploring further. This study focuses on immigrants who become civically active in their country of settlement and as such may be seen as complementary to research that investigates the transnational capital of immigrants who engage in business in either the country of settlement or upon return in the country of origin (Smith, 2001; Vanhonacker et al., 2005).

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Notes

[1] These interviews are part of a data set of 176 qualitative interviews with immigrant activists conducted under the auspices of the POLITIS project in the 25 member states of the European Union. The POLITIS project (Building Europe with New Citizens? An Inquiry into the Civic Participation of Naturalised Citizens and Foreign Residents in 25 Countries) is funded by the European Comission, DG RTD (Sixth Framework Programme, Thematic Priority 7, 2004-2007, contract no. CIT2-CT-2003-505987). For more information, see www.uni-oldenburg.de/politis-europe

[2] See Note 1 about the POLITIS database.

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Table 1

Interview no.	Gender	Age	Nationality of origin	Current citizenship	Country of residence	Length of stay (years)	Family situation	Current employment	Civic activity	Reasons for emigrating
I1	Female	36	Nigerian	Nigerian	Germany	24	Married to a German, one step son	Self employed in business finances	Kwanzaa cultural activity to promote the Black Diaspora in Germany	Family reunification (with parents)
I2	male	35	Somali	Finnish	Finland	15	Married to a Finnish Russian, three children	Project coordinator (in business)	Political activist	Asylum
I3	Male	35	Somali	Somali	Finland	4	Married to a Finn, one child	Cook	Student (??)	Asylum
I4	Male	28	Burundian	Burundian	Ireland	6.5	Partnered with a Rwandan	Driving instructor	Secretary of the Burundian and Rwandan Community Association	Asylum

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									and Secretary of the African Refugee Network	
I5	Male	N/A	Nigerian	Nigerian	Ireland	5	Married to a Nigerian, three children	Self employed	Local councilor and intercultural communication consultant	Asylum (?)
I6	Female	35	Nigerian	Nigerian	Ireland	5	Married to a Nigerian, five children	Self employed	Member of the Irish Labour party	
I7	Male		Nigerian	Nigerian	Ireland	5	Married to a Nigerian	Self employed as journalist/publisher	First multicultural award in Ireland	
I8	Male	39	Guinea Bissao	Guinea Bissao	Slovenia	20	Partnered with a Slovene, one child	Self employed business person	President of the African Centre	Studies
I9	Male	45	Nigerian	Maltese	Malta	16	Married to a Maltese	Librarian		Studies
I10	Female	34	Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone	Malta	3	Widow of a	Student and part-		Asylum

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							Sierra Leonean, two children	time nurse		
I11	male	34	Nigerian	Nigerian	Latvia	13	Married to a Latvian, two children	Teacher of English	Chairman of Afrolat	Studies
I12	Male	42	Angolan	Portuguese	Portugal	30	Married to an Angolan Portuguese, two children	Public servant	Public servant at Lisbon City Hall's Municipal Assembly	Refugee
I13	Female	60	Cape Verde	Portuguese	Portugal	28	Married to a Portuguese, no children	Government worker	To promote the empowerment of inhabitants of Cova da Moura district	By chance, wanted to go to Brazil
I14	Female	61	Cape Verde	Portuguese	Portugal	21	Married to a Portuguese, three children	Retired	President of Lisbon Capeverdean Association	To work in the Embassy of Cape Verde in

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										Portugal
I15	Male	52	Cape Verde	Portuguese	Portugal	33	Married to a Sao Tome Portuguese, two children	Employee at the post-office	President of the Cape Verde Association, CTT's National Trade Union representative	Work
I16	Male	30	Angola	Angolan	Portugal	13	Single	Self-employed, musician	Musical director of the multi ethnic and ecumenical choir Coral Gospel 100 Vozes	Studies

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