

Book Review: Integration in Ireland: The Everyday Lives of African Migrants

Blog Admin

*The integration of new immigrants is one of the most important issues in Europe, yet not enough is known about the lives of migrants. This book draws on several years of ethnographic research with African migrants in Ireland, many of whom are former asylum seekers. Against the widespread assumptions that integration has been handled well in Ireland and that racism is not a major problem, this book seeks to show that migrants are themselves shaping integration in their everyday lives in the face of enormous challenges. **Naluwembe Binaisa** recommends this read to students of identity and immigration.*



Integration in Ireland: The Everyday Lives of African Migrants.
Fiona Murphy and Mark Maguire. Manchester University Press.
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This book comes at a timely moment as European political and public discourses continue to revolve around the nexus of asylum, illegality, community cohesion and sovereign integrity. Historically, Irish migration has been associated with the reluctant departure of its people from the Emerald Isle with enduring links to their Celtic heritage, identity, and iconic timeless landscape. In this symbolic narrative the words ‘integration’, ‘Africans’ and ‘Ireland’ seem an alien combination, yet they strike at the core of the complex changes the country has undergone over the past twenty plus years. For a country synonymous with emigration, the Celtic Tiger economic boom heralded an exponential growth in immigration. This included European Union citizens, other international migrants, and asylum seekers, particularly those from Africa. This book takes an obvious yet neglected starting point and asks: what happens to people after asylum is granted? As one African mother asserts, despite Ireland’s current economic woes, her and her children are ‘here to stay’.



The book is steeped in the tenets of ethnography, drawing on deep immersive fieldwork, close observation, and engagement within the everyday lives of African migrants. Research was based in the border towns of Drogheda and Dundalk as well as Dublin with Africans predominantly from Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Integration in Ireland examined from this perspective takes on multiple layers and codes of articulation. It is an ambitious undertaking combining anthropological analysis with social theory that is differentially successful across the broad range of integration processes the book interrogates. It is most successful in giving us a detailed insight into the lives of African migrants as agents of change as opposed to victims of circumstance. The book presents its analysis along key points of integration and below I highlight three: labour markets, political participation, and education.

In “Taxis, Deregulation and Racism in Irish Border Towns” the authors fluently analyse the effects of deregulation in the taxi industry as an important site that reveals the social and economic changes in Ireland and their impacts at the local level. The authors present a multi-level analysis that critiques free market policies that simultaneously strip all workers of protection and the right to earn a living wage. They inter-relate this with concurrent local debates on racism, collectivisation, the role of the media and community identity. What should have been a route for Africans to access integration results in alienation and confrontation. Migrants’ adherence to new regulations such as charging the fare displayed on the meter leads to accusations of ‘cheating’ since they do not offer ‘local’ prices according to ‘local’ norms.

The authors demonstrate how immigration is changing the societal fabric in Ireland and at the same time entrenching myths surrounding the African community who continue to occupy the negative role of ‘the Other’. The authors analyse the complex role of rumours (government financial assistance for Africans), racist discourses and the limited solidarity across racial divides to fight policies that negatively impact local communities. The resilience of the drivers and community spokespeople who engage publicly with this heated debate, is a poignant critique repeated throughout the book of the Irish government’s ‘govern at a distance’ strategy.

“Inside the Politics Machine” focuses on integration through the lens of political participation. The authors identify access to party membership, resources, racism, existing local allegiances and rivalries, and personal versus group political objectives as important barriers. However, their multi-level analysis falls somewhat short in analysing the complex intersection of these factors. The background to Ireland’s entrenched political dynamics where national political parties dominate local politics is useful. Within this complex picture they follow the fortunes of two aspirant politicians from the African community, one backed by a major national party, the other a small independent party.

The analytical argument suffers as identified factors above are subsumed under the minutiae of campaign logistics. The lack of descriptive contextual data on the African community weakens the analytical strength of this chapter and one is left wondering about the detailed population composition of these border towns. This includes the desire and level of participation from African migrants in other local governance structures such as school boards, chambers of commerce, church councils. Low social capital appears to be an important contributory factor to the campaign failures however this is under-explored.

In contrast “Hallelujah Halloween” examines the education system as an important gateway to integration for African migrants and their children. This excellent chapter juxtaposes the complacent self-satisfaction at ministerial level that Ireland has ‘got it right’ and avoided ‘the mistakes they made in the UK’, against a background where parents, teachers and children utilise their initiatives to make ‘interculturalism’ work. The sharp critique of Ireland’s adoption of ‘interculturalism’ and scant policy articulation at the local level is refreshing. Egalitarian EU principals and a rights-based agenda are re-articulated and negotiated by schools, parents and children left to self-actualise ‘interculturalism’ within an education system that is founded on denomination and assumptions of an enduring mono-culture.

‘Integration at the chalkboard’ is a phrase that captures these efforts as the authors successfully link their in-depth research within a local school context to the material constraints of deprivation and poverty that many of these communities encounter. Teachers and parents are self-reflective and honest in assessing their competencies, aspirations, cultural differences and the limitations of their resources. The authors draw on a broad range of data and policy analysis to analyse the complex negotiations and accommodations that parents, teachers and the community make as they seek to achieve the best integration outcomes for Ireland’s ‘new immigrants’.

In conclusion, this is a well-written and argued book that engages with the multi-level discourses, policies and practices that frame African migrants’ lives. The focus on agency and positive outcomes raises the question ‘what about the casualties?’: a glaring and important analytical omission on the authors’ part. Nevertheless, what emerges is a thought-provoking insight into African migrants’ resilience, community bridge-building and a claim on Ireland through multiple practices of everyday integration.

Dr Naluwembe Binaisa is a migration specialist whose research interests include African Diasporas, development, integration processes and digital technologies. Naluwembe is currently based at the International Migration Institute, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford as the Research Officer on the African Mobility in the Great Lakes Project and the African Diasporas within Africa project, which seek in different ways to understand both theoretically and empirically the intersections of mobility, identity, urbanisation, gender and generation dynamics. [Read more reviews by Naluwembe.](#)

