The concept of African transnational “communities” is now one of the most explored ethnoscapes\(^1\) in anthropology and postcolonial studies (Appadurai, 1996). Many authors have shown the strength of migratory, economic, religious and political networks linking Africans and people of African descent living in different parts of the world (Bonacci, 2008; Chivallon, 2008; Gilroy, 1993; Guedj, 2009a, 2009b; Hall, 1990; Harris, 1982). Moreover, they have illustrated the increasing importance of religious or ethno-nationalist discourses celebrating the unity of an imagined community (Anderson, 1983). This paper advocates the necessity of contextualizing and “re-territorializing” the analysis of such globalized identities (Capone, 2002). In order to avoid cultural essentialism and, on the other side, the fascination for the “dance of flux and fragments” (Cooper, 2001), it is crucial to take into account the peculiar social and historical contexts in which those identity constructions are taking place. This paper thus explores the redefinitions of an African-oriented ideology developed mainly from 1900 onwards – Pan-Africanism – by the “new African diasporas” (Koser, 2003) within the Belgian context. In particular, using ethnographic data collected from African associations\(^2\) based in Brussels, we will depict how the term “Pan-African” came to be used by an emergent associational elite in order to

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\(^1\)“Ethnoscapes” – or “landscapes of group identity” – is an anthropological concept developed by Appadurai (1996) to describe the global circulation of cultural practices and representations people in movement are building in order to feel connected with their society of origin.

\(^2\)We use the expression “African associations” as it is employed in the associational milieu to refer to associations mainly directed by and meant for people of sub-Saharan origin. The ethnographic data in this text are based on fieldwork conducted in the African associational milieu mainly in Brussels by Nicole Grégoire beginning in 2007. The fieldwork
build an “African community” within a context of racial stigmatization. We will question the place of agency and structure in this phenomenon and the reason it differs so much from Pan-African movements in the New World.

African diasporas and the emergence of African associations in Belgium

Significant migrations from sub-Saharan Africa began during the 1960s in Belgium. At the end of the colonial period, more and more students from former colonies and protectorates – Congo, Rwanda and Burundi – came to Belgium to be trained as the administrative elite of their newly independent countries. National origins and migration trajectories progressively diversified. Student migration gradually implied other African countries and family reunification led to the feminization of the African presence (Kagné, 2000, p. 4). Degradation of living conditions in African countries after their independence and the tumultuous democratization processes of the 1990s led to further displacements within the continent and beyond. In Belgium, the number of asylum seekers grew significantly during the 1990s (Kagné et al., 2001, p. 13-14). This situation also discouraged many students from returning to their homeland. According to a 2006 census based on nationalities at birth, 93,687 people of sub-Saharan origin are established in Belgium (i.e., approximately 1% of the total Belgian population), most of them from Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Ghana, and Cameroon (CECLR, 2008).

Parallel to the evolution of migration trajectories, African associations began to develop in the 1960s. Students’ clubs, women’s associations, artistic, religious, professional or political groups were created on a national, regional or ethnic basis (Kagné & Martiniello, 2001, p. 35-38). Many of these associations remained informal, i.e. without official statutes published in Belgium’s Official Bulletin. A formal African associational milieu emerged only in the early 1990s. African associational leaders and observers refer to this decade as one of “associational efflorescence” (Gatugu, 2004; Manço, 2003; Meyers, 2000). Those leaders often deplore the climate of competition that opposes associations on the question of subsidies and/or public recognition. Many of them share the ideal of building an “organized” and “united community” in the present context of subordination and stigmatization. During the last decade, several small-scale meetings (15 to 50 participants) were organized with this goal in mind and they benefited from a certain visibility in the Belgian public sphere. These meetings formed the basis for a potential social movement (Werbner, 1991). An important number of actors involved in these gatherings are leaders or founding members of five associations that label themselves “Pan-African”. In this context, the term basically refers to those associations’ criterion of membership that goes beyond “ethnic” or national origins and reaches a sub-continental level. They are not just “Kasaian” or “Congolese” associations, but claim to be open to people of all sub-Saharan origins. Before describing them and in order to understand the present

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3 We would like to thank Quentin Schoonvaere for these data which were used for the 2008 CECLR report.

4 The words put in quotation marks are our informants’ own words.

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meanings of the term “Pan-African” in Belgium, it is necessary to contextualize the expression historically.

Pan-Africanism: A short historical overview

The term “Pan-African” is historically linked to a political and cultural movement dating back to the beginning of the 19th century. Institutionalized in 1900 through the first Pan-African Conference, the movement sought to fight discrimination of “Black” people around the world. It developed Afrocentrist rhetorics, i.e. promoting the seniority and achievements of African antique civilizations and celebrating African historical and cultural unity and common destiny, within the continent and beyond. It did so in order to advocate and promote the rights of Africans of the diaspora, particularly in the US and the Caribbean, on the one hand, and the rights of African people under colonial domination, on the other hand. Pan-Africanism advocated for the emancipation of African countries and sought their unification into an integrated political system. However, after their independence, the hope for a unified Africa proved to be in vain and the movement declined, at least as far as its political ambitions were concerned.

However, long after the fall of the colonial regimes, the Pan-African ideal has not completely faded. As we will demonstrate, it is kept alive through various kinds of cultural nationalism deeply rooted in the American continent. Secondly, in Africa, the Pan-African ideal persists through the African Union, a Pan-African political institution originating from the 1963 African Union Organization and whose ambitions are quite limited compared to the historical Pan-African agenda (Doumbi-Fakoly, 1997, p. 33; M’bokolo, 2004, p. 52). Pan-African values are also revisited through various circles and associations in different parts of the world. As M’bokolo (2004, p. 25) states it: “As an expression of the solidarity between Africans and African-rooted people and as a will to ensure freedom and development to the African continent (…), Pan-Africanism keeps on feeding ‘African renaissance’ projects”.

Pan-African associations in Belgium

What is the legacy of Pan-Africanism in Belgium? Which meanings do people currently give to the term “Pan-African” in the Belgian African associational milieu? Two orientations can be distinguished.

“Homeland politics”: the heirs of Pan-African activism

A first reformulation of Pan-Africanism in Belgium consists of political activism focusing on the African continent. It draws its inspiration directly and explicitly from the historical Pan-African movement. On the one hand, this Pan-Africanism is historically linked with the students of the diaspora, e.g. with the Fédération des

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6 By “cultural nationalism”, we mean social movements that are concerned not so much with the creation of an autonomous state but with “identity and the regeneration of the national community through the development and the strengthening of a national essence – a distinct civilization which is the product of a distinct history and culture” (Ivarsson, 2008, p. 9).
Etudiants d’Afrique Noire en France (FEANF). Launched in 1950 in Bordeaux, this association sought to mobilize “towards the independence and unity of the African states” (M’bokolo, 2004, pp. 41-52). Internationally renowned, this association was emulated in Belgium. As a result of the involvement of former students in groups inspired by FEANF and who influenced the next generation of students, several present-day Pan-African circles continue the tradition of this movement. They usually convey Afrocentrist theories and focus their actions on African politics. For example, a radio presenter on the African broadcast Sous l’Arbre à Palabre, transmitted each Sunday on “Radio Campus” at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, explained that the broadcast is led by a circle of Afrocentrists and he explained how he was initiated into Pan-African political ideas:

“There, I’ve been politically trained by (name of an intellectual belonging to the 1960s student generation). Although it is not an association, ‘Sous l’Arbre à Palabre’ works as such. Its editorial line is Afrocentrist and progressive” (11/04/2007).

The continuity of Pan-African activism can also be attributed to intellectuals who recently arrived as asylum seekers. These Pan-African activists belong to transnational associations that often do not have an official status in Belgium. The Cercle Kwame N’Krumah is a good example. It was founded in Lomé University (Togo) and then recreated in Belgium. In an interview with a Togolese journalist, one of its representatives describes the Cercle as follows:

“Politically, what we do to heighten our compatriots’ awareness of the Togolese issue is certainly known in Belgium, in Togo and other African countries such as the Ivory Coast and the DRC. Indeed, since the implacable dictatorship sent us into exile in the beginning of the 1990s, we have not sat idly by. We have organized our compatriots into associations such as the Cercle Kwame N’Krumah, the ‘F2P’ (Pan-African Patriotic Front) etc. (…) The Cercle Kwame N’Krumah was created to bring back Dr Kwame N’Krumah’s philosophy and ideas, which remain immortal. The solutions for African developmental and emancipation problems are to be found in those Pan-African ideas. What is Pan-Africanism exactly? It is African unity following the example of the European Union which is presented today as a guarantee of development and security”.

As illustrated here, Pan-African activism in Belgium is not solely a phenomenon elaborated in migratory situations. It also stems from individuals who have been activists in their homeland. Their migration stimulates Pan-African activism revivals in the diaspora, in the host country and beyond. Since they focus on homeland political situations and following Lafleur’s typology, the activities of these circles can be described as “homeland politics”, i.e. “political activities that immigrant communities develop in the host country in domains exclusively relevant for their homeland” and which “are used to mark immigrant communities’ support or hostility to the homeland ruling authorities” (Lafleur, 2005, p. 27).

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“Immigrant politics”: a migrants’ federative Pan-Africanism

Lafleur distinguishes homeland politics from a second type of activism labelled “immigrant politics” which focuses instead on improving living conditions for the immigrant community. In Belgium, “Pan-African”-labelled associations of this type have emerged during the last two decades. With a legal statute, visibility in the public sphere, and (for some of them) strong commitment to represent “the African community” of Belgium, or even of Europe, they put forward another interpretation of Pan-Africanism. Here, “Pan-African” does not refer to current politics in Africa nor to the past prowess of African civilizations (although these topics may be discussed). Members of these associations rely on the expression in a generic sense to distinguish them from other African associations that gather people of a single “ethnic” or national origin. The term “Pan-African” here suggests organizations that go beyond these particular origins and encompass the entire “Black” sub-continent. Most of their active members are first-generation migrants who came to Belgium as students and have been living there for an average of twenty-five years. They are usually in regular work, sometimes in public service. They have committed themselves to a variety of African associations for several years. Thus, they form a social network that can be considered as part of an associational elite due to their long-term involvement, their intellectual background, their professional status, and the social capital they have managed to build within Belgian society, particularly through their political and media connections.

In 1994, the creation of the Council of African Communities in Belgium and in Europe (Conseil des Communautés Africaines en Belgique et en Europe / Raad van de Afrikaanse Gemeenschappen in België en in Europa – CCAEB/RVDAGEB) constituted the first attempt to create an “African community” in the public sphere. It was the very first organization with the explicit goal to federate all African associations, regardless of their ethnic or national background. It brought together almost eighty associations. Interviews with some of its founders have demonstrated a link between the federation’s emergence and three important socio-political evolutions of the time. First, the creation of an imagined European community stimulated the will to establish an “African” corollary. As one of the founders explains:

“They were preparing the 1992 Europe (...). There were posters showing white people and Europe: “We, Europeans”, etc. You see? (...) And I took it very badly; I felt that I had no place. (...) And I said: “It’s a platform for Africa that we need, we need a federation of associations, so that we can find a place in this Europe” (18/05/2007).

Secondly, the 1990s were also a decade of strong debates at the European level about immigration and integration. Some consultative agencies, such as the European Union Migrants’ Forum, were created to involve migrant organizations in these discussions. One of the leaders of the CCAEB/RVDAGEB became the General Secretary of this Forum.

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8 For detailed descriptions of these evolutions, see Guiraudon (2004), Rea (2007), Vinikas et al. (1993).
Thirdly, at the national level, the rise of the far right in Flanders in 1988, and the riots that took place in 1991 in some of the so-called immigrant neighbourhoods in Brussels focused the attention of federal and regional Belgian governments on the question of integration. They released unprecedented funds for the creation of intermediary structures between public authorities and people with an immigrant background. This context stimulated many initiatives and marked the beginning of an ethnic associational efflorescence (Manço, 2003, p. 18-19). Another CCAEB/RVDAGEB founder describes the necessity that was felt at the time of taking up one’s position with regards to other ethnic groups present in Belgium:

“That was quite irritating to me: this lack of a Pan-African vision. (…) The sub-Saharan people were by no means visible here. Others could arrive there [in the public space] and claim: ‘We, the Italian community’, ‘We, the Greek community’, ‘We the Turkish community’, ‘the Moroccan one’… But no one said ‘the African community’, then…” (24/01/2009).

The CCAEB/RVDAGEB took advantage of this favourable political context to attain representation in Belgian and European consultative bodies involving ethnic organizations in order to lobby in the name of “African communities”. However, this favourable context declined considerably by the end of the 1990s, a process that can also be linked to changes in the Belgian policies of integration. In particular, the federation was prompted to split so as to follow the Belgian federal system which required associations to be part of either the French- or the Flemish-speaking community in order to benefit from subsidies. Consequently, a Flemish federation, the RVDAGE/Vlaanderen (RVDAGE/VL), was created in 1996. This allowed funds from Flemish public institutions to be channelled to affiliated African associations. But the division of the federation also meant the creation of two distinct Advisory Boards and, consequently, overburdened the organization as increased funding possibilities attracted additional associations into the federation. This pressure led to internal conflicts that weakened the twin federations and caused them to lose their credibility at the end of the 1990s (Grégoire, 2009).

In 2004, the creation of MOJA brought about a new turn in the construction of an imagined “African community”. Significantly, MOJA means “one” in Swahili: once again, the emphasis is on uniting people from various sub-Saharan countries. Thirty-five persons founded MOJA, mainly from the DRC, but also from Cameroon, Gabon, Mauritius, Kenya and Rwanda. The consciousness of constituting an elite appears very explicitly on MOJA’s website which states that the association has gathered “most of the Belgian politicians of African descent and big names of the sub-Saharan associations” as well as “business people and academics/researchers.”

Some MOJA administrators are also members of Pan-African activist (homeland politics-oriented) and Afrocentrist associations of the type described above; but as

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9 The Belgian State is subdivided into three linguistic Communities (Flemish, French and German) and into three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital). Integration has been a regional competence since 1994 (Gsir, 2006). For a detailed description of this policy and its consequences see Ouali (1992a, 1992b) and Rea and Brion (1992).

a broader organization looking for recognition in the Belgian public sphere, MOJA does not openly advocate these views. The association emerged in a political context marked by the growing concerns of political parties regarding “ethnic votes” and, consequently, by their growing interest in Belgian candidates of sub-Saharan origin. This constituted a new opportunity for the development of a representative structure for the “African community”. In an interview, a founder of MOJA explained how the initiative was launched after a conversation he had with an association colleague who was also a local councillor:

“He [the colleague] said to me: ‘I’ve got an idea. But I’m a politician. My idea is that in a country like this one, where community issues take up a lot of space (…), African associations, politicians, and all other people concerned should gather to lay the foundations of something representative and firm to face the socio-economic reality of this country. (…) You, as an associational leader, are supposed to be more neutral. Then I’d like you to conduct this meeting where we are going to discuss the possibility of launching something quite credible’” (19/06/2007).

Although it only published official statutes in 2004, MOJA, as a result of its political network, was received in 2003 by the Belgian government’s *informateur* as a “representative of the African community” after having organized a “Forum of the African Community”. The same occurred in 2007 before and after the federal elections. However, while the association gathered many members at first, it rapidly ended up being managed by a small group of three or four persons. A founder explains:

“When MOJA was created, everybody paid to become a member. We got 6,000 euros at once! It was just after [Federal deputy] Di Rupo’s appointment to the post of government *informateur* and he received MOJA as the representative of the African community. Everybody wanted to become a member because they thought they could earn money. At the next General Assembly, 50 percent of the members were already missing. At the next one, we did not reach a quorum. Now, we should call for a meeting but we don’t manage to do it” (04/04/2007).

These two short portraits shed light on the relation between the development of a migrants’ federative Pan-Africanism in the African associational milieu in Belgium and the national and European political agendas. Referring to the dialectically linked polarities of identity processes, the “African community” was, at the beginning of the 1990s, more a matter of attribution than of self-definition (Jenkins, 1997, p. 52-73). Although people of sub-Saharan origin have always had to deal with being labelled by the majority as “African” or “Black” in their daily life, their associations remained largely based on national or regional origins. Expressions of Pan-Africanism mostly remained limited to individual opinions or political activism aimed at the continent of origin. The evolution of the European and Belgian authorities’ concerns can – at least partly – explain the transition to Pan-African references in the formal associational milieu during the 1990s: their will to take people of foreign origins into account in

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11 In Belgium, the government’s *informateur* is a political personality named by the King after elections. He or she must meet different political actors in order to define a potential governmental coalition. He or she also meets members of “civil society” to hear their claims.
the new political context opened the door to “community” representatives, and was instrumental in creating these “communities”.

**Towards an interpretive community**

This political context was the basis for the development of a social process we could conceptualize in terms of “interpretive community” – thus focusing our attention on the actors’ agency. Paul Gilroy, and, a few years later, Pnina Werbner, proposed to consider certain Black British movements in such terms, for they produce and refer to a common symbolic repertoire to federate segments of a heterogeneous population toward collective action (Gilroy, 2002; Werbner, 1991). For example, Pnina Werbner evokes Black activists in Britain who refer to “themes and symbols” drawn from “Pan-Africanism, World Islam, Third World anti-colonialism” and so forth in their struggle “against racism and material subordination”. She argues that, in doing so, they create a common discourse that relates to “the contemporary conditions of the group within the larger society” and that can become “a cultural basis for unified political action which can encompass the different ethnic and immigrant segments” (Werbner, 1991, p. 26).

We can hereby establish a parallel to the situation we have discussed so far. Despite the departure of and dissension amongst members\(^{12}\), the creation of associations like the CCAEB/RVDAGEB and MOJA points to the will of an emergent associational elite to build a unified image of people of sub-Saharan origin. This elite forms a social network likely to be activated for collective action. It organizes public events that denounce racism and discrimination in Belgium as well as the consequences of underdevelopment in African countries, and which seek to unify African-rooted people as a result of common references, grievances and goals. These events constitute the common symbolic repertoire of this nascent interpretive community. Three of them are discussed hereafter.

**Celebrating Black heroes**

The first event aimed to set-up a kind of hagiography revisiting historic achievements of Black people. In 2004, the CCAEB/RVDAGEB attained funding from the Brussels-Capital Region and from local authorities for a youth delinquency prevention project. This allowed the association to rent a hall in *Matonge*, a reputedly “African neighbourhood” in Brussels. By analogy to this toponym, the hall was called *L'Espace Matonge*. Since most African associations do not have a permanent

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\(^{12}\) We have already talked about members’ defections from both associations. It must be added that some former CCAEB/RVDAGEB and MOJA leaders founded new Pan-African associations with more specific ambitions. Those associations are the *Union des Femmes Africaines/African Women’s League* (UFA/AWL), founded in 1998, and *Raffia Synergies*, founded in 2005. As its name suggests, the former has a specific gender perspective. It promotes African women’s associational activities through the organization of charity dinners, conferences and a “Women’s Action Award” ceremony that takes place on Pan-African Women’s Day during the first week of August. The second organization was founded in 2005. Similar to the Rotary or Lions Clubs, it seeks to create networks of African-rooted professionals in order to develop mutual help and solidarity with the continent of origin.
room at their disposal, the hall has, from its inception, been repeatedly used for hosting debates, conferences, charity dinners, shows and festivals organized by various African associations. “L’Espace” is often described, in this small milieu, as a hyphenated place, a symbolic space where Pan-African ambitions are given concrete expression. In 2006, MOJA and the CCAEB/RVDAGEB organized the first “African Day of Black Heroes”. Five political “heroes” were celebrated: two representatives of the Civil Rights Movement (Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King), one American Black nationalist (Malcom X), and two important French figures of anti-colonialism (Cheikh Anta Diop, Frantz Fanon). Mixing heroic and victimary rhetorics in order to underline and overcome the African-rooted people’s subaltern position in Belgium, MOJA explains on its website that the event sought to “tell Black Heroes’ stories in order to rebuild a victorious history”. The association justified the necessity of such an enterprise as follows:

“The hero is the one whose life has been a ceaseless struggle for the liberation of Black people from the yoke of an image and a false history within which those who dominate them try to maintain them. (…) To inform the disillusioned Africans about the capacity of their own people, about the life of these heroes, is to give them back self-confidence and hope for their future. (…) To tell the story of those heroes to the young Africans of Belgium or Europe, is to try to break, at least in their minds, the spiral of self-destruction, of the lack of self-confidence and of the society’s rejection”.

“Learning a lesson” from recent successes

These Pan-African associations are not only concerned with revisiting the past. Their leaders also call upon more recent events in order to “create a community consciousness” – these are their words – oriented toward the overcoming of African-rooted people’s minority status. Barack Obama’s victory in US presidential elections was an opportunity to go further in the construction of an interpretive community. On the evening of his investiture (20/01/2009), the Pan-African associations’ leaders met at L’Espace Matonge with other associational leaders in order to watch the TV broadcast of the event. During the debate that followed, Obama’s victory was rebuilt as a symbol of the victory of a “community consciousness” within Black movements, however divided they have been in the US. For instance, one of the speakers was warmly greeted when he said that:

“the Black Panthers, Martin Luther King: for a while we thought that they were working each on their side, but in reality, although they had different positions, they were converging toward a similar goal. (…) In reality there was a federation of orientation”.

So, in Belgium, if Pan-African associational leaders and others gathered at L’Espace Matonge, it was to “learn a lesson” – that was the title of the evening – from the American presidential success in order to elaborate upon future collective action that would enhance African-rooted people’s possibilities for social mobility, slowed

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down by the permanence of exclusion and of racially-based social characterisation. Indeed, as another speaker put it:

“Today, there is a glass ceiling. We see what lies beyond. And today, it’s up to us to set up the strategy to reach, beyond the ceiling, the point that we wish to reach. (...) Fortunately, some of us have reached a certain age. Some of us don’t necessarily have this ambition to be the leader who makes things happen any more. This is how we all were before. (...) Now, we enter the time when we will realize the goals of a group, of a community”.

These words reflect a central goal of this interpretive community, namely that more and more people stigmatized as “Black” should acquire positions of responsibility in Belgian society. They reject the “Black condition” and strive to overcome the racial minority status (Ndiaye, 2008). This also appears clearly in the memoranda sent by MOJA to the government informateur. In the 2007 version, the association wrote that “the African community of Belgium [is] concerned with the full expression of its citizenship and with being fully recognized as part of Belgian society”, which means “to be present and visible in the media and in the social, economic and political public space”, “to dismantle the schemes that stigmatize and undermine African people” and “to chase away people using or willing to use racism in general, and anti-Black racism in particular” (MOJA, 2007, p. 2).

Keeping the link with Africa: Commemorating African victims of underdevelopment and migration

For the associational elite, what is at stake is not only the act of “making a community” around a minority experience in Europe. A third mode of construction of this elite’s symbolic repertoire relates to identifying with the suffering of African populations and with the tragedies of those who decided to leave Africa. Therefore, each summer in a “platform of Pan-African associations”, they organise a commemoration at the national airport in Brussels in memory of Yaguine and Fodé, two young clandestine passengers found dead in 1999 in the baggage hold of an airplane coming from Guinea-Conakry. The ceremony varies from one year to the next, but the integral part of the commemoration remains a French and a Flemish discourse given by two associational leaders; the reading of the teenagers’ heart-breaking letter to “Excellencies, members and representatives of Europe”; and the placing of a spray of flowers with a banner with the names of Yaguine and Fodé with the date they were discovered in the airplane. This commemoration is not only a plea to Belgian and European authorities and people; it is also a plea to the Africans of Europe to remind them of their responsibility for the development of African countries. One of the organizers explains:

“It’s the whole issue of migration and its reasons, but it’s also the question of European Africans’ reflecting on what they can do for the development of their continent of origin. These two children are emblematic of the drama of underdevelopment” (19/06/2007).

Here, the “Pan-African” label takes its transnational historical meaning by evoking the common destiny the African diaspora has with its continent of origin.
In contrast: African-American cultural nationalism in the US

These migrants’ federative Pan-African associations are also worth considering in comparison to what they are precisely not. Taking into account the globalization of ethnoscapes mentioned in the introduction, one could expect Belgian Pan-African leaders to share common features with the African-American cultural “Black nationalism” nowdays in the foreground in the US. While both movements are heirs of the same historical Pan-Africanism, they differ greatly on some issues.

First, voluntary associations have always been more powerful in the US and have generally benefited from higher membership than in European countries (Dekker et al., 1998), although associational involvement in the US diminished during the last decades of the 20th century (Putnam, 2000). African-American associations gather more people and resort to much more confrontational rhetoric than their Belgian Pan-African counterparts. They have played a central role in the development of Black nationalism. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), of which William E.B. Du Bois was a founder in 1909, or the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded by Marcus Garvey in 1914, are good examples. The latter had millions of members, inside the USA and beyond. In Belgium, by contrast, membership of Pan-African associations amounts (at best) to less than one hundred. Nowadays, Black nationalism in the US is still supported by a dense associative constellation, the leaders of which express their demands very boldly in comparison with the Belgian Pan-African associational leaders. For example, the National Black United Front (NBUF), founded in 1980, aims “to unify Black people from various social/political persuasions, to build a politically conscious, unified, committed and effective Black mass movement and to confront white supremacy in its various manifestations” Such a fiery speech would not be delivered by Belgian Pan-African leaders, who are much more moderate and who would not phrase their political agenda in terms of confrontation with “white supremacy” in a context where public racial categorizations are taboo and where “Black” is euphemized as “African”.

Second, the question of “cultural identity” is much more salient in the US than in Belgium. Belgian federative Pan-Africanism is concerned with access to rights and/or public funds, not so much with the ontology of “being African” that preoccupies many African-American militants. Indeed, after the wane of the highly politicized, sometimes revolutionary movement of the Black Power in the 1960s and 1970s, Black nationalism in America has gradually turned, in the 1980s, into a mobilization more focussed on cultural than political issues. Afrocentrist theories constitute its main expression today (Austin, 2009; Fauvelle-Aymar, 2002). Molefi Asante, their most famous advocate, follows the thesis developed in the 1950s by Cheikh Anta Diop, a Senegalese intellectual. According to the latter, History’s first great civilization was born in Africa. Pharaonic Egypt, a racially black civilization, laid the foundations of Greek, and consequently of European civilizations in general. It was also responsible

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14 See note 6.

for the populating of Africa. A substantial identity links all African civilizations – including (according to Asante) African-American communities. Through slavery and colonization, the Europeans tried to ruin this civilization. Well aware of the political stakes of history, Diop and Asante advocate the recognition of Africa’s central role in human history and they urge Africans (and African-Americans) to re-appropriate their past.

Although these assumptions gave rise to heated debates about the scientific value of these theories (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2000), Afrocentrism is also worth considering in its historical and social context, i.e. as an identity process. In the US, scholarly Afrocentrism has eventually led to an exhortation to “popular afrocentricity” such that African descendants should re-learn customs that are in accordance with their African “essence” (Asante cited in Guedj, 2009b, p. 15-17). They need to separate themselves from the hegemonic White society through distinct daily attitudes and folklore including peculiar dance and music, African clothes, specific celebrations like *kwanzaa* (new year’s eve) and revisited religious practices like voodoo, *orisha*, *akan*, *kemet*, etc. (Capone, 1999; Guedj, 2004, 2009a). Highly militant movements such as the NBUF partake in these Afrocentrist aspirations. “We must remember that we are a great people with a culture and civilization which extend to antiquity.” The NBUF organizes a yearly pilgrimage to places linked to the slave trade during which emphasis is on respect of “traditional African religion” including the Ifa ceremony, white clothes to respect the *egun* (ancestors in Yoruba), etc.

As a matter of fact, Black nationalism is also evident in a variety of churches and other religious associations, be they neo-traditional, Afrocentrist Christian, or Afroasiatic Islamic activist (Guedj, 2003). Furthermore, the movement is institutionalized through a variety of schools offering Afrocentrist teaching to African-American children and through university departments such as Temple University’s African-American Studies where Molefi Asante is a professor (Austin, 2009).

In comparison with the effervescence of American Black nationalism with its huge capacity of political mobilization and its penetrating power in state institutions, Belgian Pan-African associations seem to remain in the background. The situation of African-Americans and of “Afropeans” obviously differs in many ways. The former have been established from the 16th century onwards, mainly as a consequence of the slave trade. They have a long tradition of fighting for fundamental rights in the American nation while the latter are first- or second-generation migrants, who, although they deplore racial discrimination in the Belgian society, have never had to fight for their rights in the same way. Their involvement in Belgian political life seems to be geared rather towards recognition by the public institutions or political parties than a fierce struggle against “White supremacy”. With regard to Black cultural nationalism, the situation is also very different. The Africa of the Afrocentrist African-American, including ancient Egyptian glory and cultural and religious unity, has less appeal among first-generation African migrants in Belgium and is not expressed so explicitly.

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17 See note 15.
in the public sphere, although it has a certain echo among several associational actors. Indeed, most African associations are led by first-generation migrants and remain largely based on national, regional or “ethnic” grouping criteria. Just a few African association leaders identify themselves with the entire sub-continent. Pan-African federative associations are only emerging in Belgium, with a certain elite constituting a symbolic repertoire but not (yet) reinventing wide “African” cultural practices. Moreover, those who claim to represent “African people” as a whole have adopted an accommodating strategy (Myrdal, 1996, p. 720) that prevents them from advocating a voluntary political and cultural removal from “white” society which is simply inconceivable in a country promoting multiculturalism but wary of institutionalising cultural differences in such a divisive way in the public sphere. The idea of Afrocentrist schools for black children would seem properly appalling to Belgian authorities and “public opinion”. The “multicultural society” of present-day US – which allows the very idea of such schools – is to a large extent a consequence of the way the “Black and White divide” has shaped American history, especially during the Civil War and the Civil Rights struggle. In Belgium, the main division at stake for the last century has been the one between French and Flemish speakers which has left little room for any other cultural nationalist discourse, especially from groups whose presence has long been thought of as temporary.

In sum, the position advocated by the Belgian Pan-African associational elite appears to be quite far from African-American nationalism. We have only presented here a few aspects of the symbolic repertoire it is gradually constructing. We hope to have shown, nevertheless, that the symbolic elaboration of this nascent Belgian Pan-African interpretive community, although much more muffled than its overseas equivalent, does not come out of nowhere. It also revisits the long history of relations between the West and Africa and feeds on a transnational imaginary. Pan-African references are well-known among these associational elites, some of whom support Afrocentrist views but would not state them in political claims destined to Belgian authorities. The migrants’ federative Pan-Africanism came forth in a political context that greatly influenced its orientations. The aftermath of the 1990s was, in Belgium as in Europe, the result of a decade rich in discussions about European citizenship, integration and discrimination. This prompted an unprecedented associational dynamism with a concern for the institutional representation of “the African community” and for the growing political participation of Belgians of African origin. An associational elite emerged and is now striving to constitute a “community consciousness” oriented toward collective action. Hence, if one can speak of identity politics, it must be underlined that, in its current state, the symbolic repertoire inspiring the movement leans toward the option of “making a community” on the basis of a “pragmatic black consciousness” – a consciousness founded upon what is defined as common interest, rather than upon a cultural essentialism proclaiming the existence of a “Black people” (Ndiaye, 2008; Shelby, 2002).