Creating New Spaces, Claiming Rights. West African Immigrants in Istanbul

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Over the last decade something publicly unknown is happening in Istanbul: West African immigrants are creating new public spaces around Tarlabaşı. Although these spaces are small in terms of number and size, the emerging spatial practices and relations can be regarded as an indicator of the cultural and social transformations that is shaped by the recent transnational migration movements via and in Turkey. Recent transnational migration movements through and within Turkey are accompanied by spatial practices. The West African group in Istanbul, mostly consisting of undocumented immigrants, has been developing local and transnational networks and connections to resist their exclusion from the formal citizenship rights.

The relationship between the establishment of public space and the claim making for of immigrant rights has become an important theme of enquiry. Clearly, establishment of spaces used exclusively by immigrants to help them, especially marginalized immigrant groups, to forge communities (Flores 2003). In varying contexts around globe, undocumented immigrants who are the target of exclusion from sort of formal rights, struggle to create public spaces as a means to reconstitute the preconstructed confines of their political involvement in the given host society (Nyers 2003). It is empirically and theoretically significant to elaborate upon the ways in which immigrants create new spaces and develop new forms of social relations. Understanding this enables researchers to reconsider the conventional boundaries between citizen insiders and immigrant outsiders. Although irregular migrant groups often

live shadowy lives to seek invisibility, the existence of the public spaces owned/used by immigrants can be regarded as a challenge to the prevailing norms constructed around the division between citizens and undocumented immigrant. As I will explore through the case of the African immigrants in Istanbul, the creation of new spaces enables the subordinated individuals to collectively organize themselves as a group, as well as to protect themselves from repressive elements produced by local power holders.

In this way, my study aims to demonstrate that new public spaces established by the West African immigrants around Tarlabaşı act as a form of resistance against their targeted exclusion from the formal citizenship rights in Turkey. Drawing upon fieldwork I conducted in the West African public spaces, I will examine what role spatial practices play in fostering group solidarity and in establishing networks with the host society institutions and actors. Although most of these public spaces are owned by the Nigerian immigrants, I prefer to call them West African social spaces since they provide a public sphere for other ethnic groups from the West Africa region as well. The first part of this paper describes the general features of irregular migration in Turkey. The second part of this paper examines Sub-Saharan African migrants in Istanbul, which can be seen as a larger group to which the West-Africans socially belong. Then, by shortly elaborating my initial experiences during the fieldwork, I will show, using empirical observations, the isolation and spatial marginalization of the immigrant groups as a result of the host society's (in this case Turkey) legal system dynamics. Finally, I will discuss the emergence of migrant public spaces, focusing on a Nigerian restaurant. The remainder of the paper will further analyze various other survival strategies developed by West African immigrant as a response to exclusionary mechanisms of the citizenship ideology in Turkey.

Irregular migration in Turkey

It is noteworthy to make an initial clarification regarding the difficulties in developing relevant classifications to identify the status of several immigrant groups. While describing the particular circumstances of migrant groups, it is inevitably necessary to apply definitions and categorizations. But in reality the legal and political status of migrants is not fixed and is subject to frequent change (Kopnina 2005: 32). In the similar vein, the terms »irregular«, »undocumented«, or »clandestine« do not adequately explain the causes and nature of particular immigrant experiences. For instance »people who enter a country with proper document-

tion may decide to over-stay and take on employment in violation of conditions of entry, thus become[ing] ›irregular‹ in one sense whilst being ›documented‹ at the time of entry« (Rajaram Grundy-Warr 2005: 99-100). Accordingly, a comprehensive and accurate representation of irregular migration is extremely difficult and highly problematic. With these shortcomings in mind, this part of the article aims merely to draw a general outline of the demographic profile of irregular migrants in Turkey based on existing literature. In general, the literature on immigration policies and regulations in Turkey constitute studies with macro level approaches based on political science and demographic analysis. Moreover there are limited numbers of studies that reflect the sociological or anthropological aspects of irregular migration in Turkey (for ethnographically informed studies see Brewer and Yükseker 2006; Danış 2006). Consequently, there is an evident problem concerning the lack of substantive knowledge on this specific issue.

Due to transformations of global migration patterns in the last two decades, Turkey has encountered atypical migration movements. Recent movements into and through Turkey consist mainly of asylum seekers, refugees, transit migrants, and clandestine laborers who »began to arrive in small numbers and subsequently in an ever-rising tide which has reached sizeable figures« (İçduygu 2005:331). Irregular migration into Turkey can be classified into three categories: immigration from Eastern Europe, transit migration, and asylum seekers (İçduygu 2005: 333). Immigrants from Eastern Europe are in search of employment in Turkey, while the second groups, transit migrants, intend to stay temporarily in Turkey en-route to European countries. Transit migrants who come to Turkey are mainly from the Middle East, predominantly Iranians and Iraqis; various Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; and African countries like the Congo, Nigeria and Somalia. For these migrants Turkey is a transit stop on the way to West European countries. Most of them enter in Turkey through illegal means while others become illegal as they overstay their tourist visas (İçduygu 2005). The third group of migrants in Turkey is refugees and/or asylum seekers. Most of those who cannot continue onwards to Europe decide to stay in Turkey. Many asylum seekers, despite their rejected asylum status also continue to stay in Turkey.

Sub-Saharan African immigrants in Turkey

»Africans« as used by the immigrants themselves, mainly refers to the black community in Istanbul from the African continent. However, Istanbul is also home to immigrants from Northern African countries such as Morocco or Algeria (Perouse, 2006). The geographical category »sub-Saharan Africa« is, therefore, more convenient to denote the regional background of the black immigrants living in Istanbul. Few statistical resources are available to evaluate the Sub-Saharan Migrants' demographic significance accurately. According to unofficial the estimations, approximately 6,000 undocumented sub-Saharan migrants live in Istanbul (Brewer/Yükseker 2006: 31). Presumably, compared to many other cases of irregular migration, the population of sub-Saharan Africans in Istanbul has remained constant or has started to decrease since the early 1990s until present day. This decline in population leaves the sub-Saharan immigrant group with a lack of well established social and political representation and may be one of the reasons for the great power differentials between the sub-Saharan Africans and their host society in Turkey.

Sub-Saharan Africans in Istanbul are extremely heterogeneous in terms origin, political and economic conditions of their sending countries (including war and civil war), ethnicity, language, and sociocultural capital. The immigrants from the sub-Saharan countries fall into the categories described above of asylum seekers, refugees, and transit migrants. They mainly come from Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Somalia, Rwanda, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia and Guinea. Among the immigrants two main groups form the spoken languages; Anglophones such as Nigerians and Ghanalese and Francophone such as Congolese. One visible form of data regarding the increasing African population in Turkey was obtained from name of statistical office, or government indicating »the notable change in the composition of asylum-seekers to Turkey in 2003. In 2003 183 Somali and 64 Sudanese citizens sought asylum [in Turkey]« (İçduygu 2004: 333).

The sub-Saharan Africans immigrants in Istanbul can be broadly divided in two groups: West- and East-Africans. However, these geographical divisions should not be taken for granted, since the social and cultural divisions between East and West Africans living in Istanbul are generally blurry and dynamic. The main purpose of depicting such simplistic observation is to provide a simple picture of Sub-Saharan Africans of Istanbul. Although my research did not include the East-African immigrants, coming mainly from Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, some East African informants indicate that East African immigrants are

culturally closer to each other. On the other hand, they are more isolated in comparison to the West Africans, such as Ghanaians and Nigerians who have stronger associations. Language is a significant problem for most East Africans who live in Turkey, since most Turkish people they encounter in their daily lives cannot speak English. The East African immigrants are mostly asylum seekers, many of whom do not look for a job since they do not see employment as a possibility. Somalian migrants, for instance, don't have passports since the Somalian government does not allow people to leave their countries, and so any opportunity of receiving a work visa is denied them.

The economic instabilities in West Africa, on the other hand, constitute the primary motivation of the West African immigrants' deterritorialization. To obtain upward economic mobility, they join immigration flows, like many other immigrants traveling from the global south to the global north, on illegal, risky, and expensive journeys. For the migrants, Turkey is a stop-over, on the transit- route to their preferred destinations: Europe and North America; places they imagine as sources of future wealth, and freedom as one Nigerian man did, before he started his journey:

»[…] before deciding to migrate, I did not know any place called Turkey. But when I lost my job at the airline company [in Nigeria], there was this need to move out of the country, to find a better job. People are going out: ›tomorrow this friend is going to Italy‹, ›Maybe I can pass to Germany‹. Then you want to go. Nobody wants try other ways, everybody [thinks they can] go to Germany, to London [to] make big dollars. That is the mentality of most of the immigrants«.

According to my informants, immigration from Nigeria started 15-20 years ago. Apprehension numbers from the Bureau for Foreigners, Borders, and Asylum[1] make up the estimates that nearly 20 Nigerians were apprehended in 1996 and 419 in 2001 (İçduygu 2003: 25). Although this data indicates an increase of Nigerian immigration, one cannot make accurate estimations of the Nigerian immigrants' demographic structures in the past.

Terminology describing migrant statuses is significant for this study, since immigrant illegality is constructed is in part by the terminology itself. The terms »illegal«, »illicit«, and »clandestine« are applied by various media discourses, politicians, and economic interest groups which represent immigration as a threat to the nation-state order and sta-

1 The Bureau of Foreigners is part of the Turkish Directorate of General Security of the Ministry of Interior.

bility (Pugh 2001). This study will apply the category of »undocumented immigrants« to refer the social group under examination. Furthermore, most of the Nigerian immigrants can be categorized as »transit migrants« who intend to make travel via Turkey to Europe. Inevitably these categories fail to fully describe the characteristics of the Nigerian immigrants in Turkey, since their community includes different immigrant profiles such as those of asylum seeker; some Nigerians living in Istanbul have applied for asylum status and did gain asylum status. There is also a group of Nigerians whose destination was not Europe, but Turkey where they are involved in the transnational trade networks between Turkey and Nigeria.

Fieldwork

This essay draws on ethnographic research I conducted between December 2005 and May 2006 [2]. Most of the research was conducted in Nigerian social spaces in Tarlabaşı where the African immigrants and other irregular migrants such as Iraqi Arabs, Iraqi Kurds, Iranians, Filipinos, and Kurdish immigrants found refuge. Ethnographic data concerning daily immigrant practices in public spaces was obtained primarily through in-depth-interviews conducted with total of three female and eleven male immigrants. In addition to these interviews, participant observations in the immigrant restaurants and international call centers, constitutes the bulk of the data around which this paper is constructed.

This section summarizes the early research processes, not only to contextualize my rationale for this study but also to describe the immigrant group's isolation and spatial marginalization by Turkish political and social dynamics, their invisibility in Turkish public discourses, and their strategies to seek invisibility in response to the alienating dimensions embedded in their encounters with Turkish citizens.

The scarcity of studies about immigrant groups in Turkey, particularly micro-level studies, in addition to the lack of basic quantitative information is one of the main problems for researchers concerned with African immigrants in Istanbul. Due to the limited research and literature on the African immigrants in Istanbul, data for the purpose of this study was collected by directly contacting organizations with close social links to the sub-Saharan African immigrants in Istanbul.

2 My first visit to the Amina Restaurant, where I met many of my informants and conducted interviews was on December 12th, 2005. My periodical visits – sometimes twice a week, sometimes twice in a month – continued until early May.

The initial data I collected is based on contacts and interviews with NGOs, such as Caritas[3] and Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Refugee Legal Aid Program (RLAP) [4], who work with asylum seekers. During my volunteer work at RLAP in the summer of 2005, I worked with asylum seekers and transit immigrant groups. There I learned about Turkish refugee law, strategies asylum seeker organizations use in their efforts to assist refugees and asylum seekers, and how refugee status is determined through the negotiations between legal aid officers and UHNCR.

While working at RLAP, I learned about the presence of some Anglophone sub-Saharan transit immigrants. Since I was not able to speak the native languages of immigrants from Iraq, Iran, or Afghanistan, for my research I decided to focus on the Anglophone immigrants. They lived in Tarlabaşı, a crime ridden lower class Istanbul neighborhood, situated very close to Taksim, one of Istanbul's commercial centers. I started to conduct spatial ethnographies in Tarlabaşı and interview real estate dealers. Meanwhile, I found an African restaurant, *Amina's Restaurant*, where the African immigrants met regularly.

During my first visit to the restaurant, I was »welcomed to the Africa in Istanbul« by Kanu[5], a male immigrant who later became my key informant. Kanu was working on a film project documenting the lives of immigrants in Tarlabaşı, for which he was seeking financial and technical support. His interest in the living conditions of the African immigrants and in me, a Turkish citizen and university student, were important factors in the formation of our close relationship. Due to Kanu's connections to other Nigerians in the community I was able to obtain detailed information about the West African and Nigerians in Istanbul; Kanu was a frequent guest in Amina's restaurant, was well known and among other Nigerian immigrants, and was the human resources coordinator in the Nigerian Association. Moreover, I helped to translated conversations and mediated between the immigrants and their Turkish neighbors at the African restaurant. Among the immigrants I met at the restaurant, I made a random selection to make up my sample group. This process can be also described as snowball technique. Furthermore, I participated in and initiated group discussions, also called focus group interviews, among the immigrants in the restaurant.

3 Caritas is an international missionary charity organization providing social services to Iraqi Christians such as food, education and legal aid.

4 Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Refugee Legal Aid Program was established in 2004 by a group of lawyers and human rights activists to provide legal services to asylum seekers in Turkey.

5 All the names are pseudonyms.

Research Caveats

In my research I was unable to address several important issues due to a lack of access to specific data. First, the gendered perspective on immigration is missing from my research. Whereas the West African immigrant spaces were mostly dominated by men, the immigrant women used to frequently visit those spaces as well. The gendered aspect of immigrant experiences, including for instance, the effects of high rates of contract marriages, needs to be explored in future research. Secondly, during my research I learned about a group of immigrants who work in small factories and ateliers under unhealthy and poor conditions. Contacting this immigrant worker group was not easily possible, since these workers rarely visit the immigrant public spaces. Furthermore, since they worked long hours, they did not have much time to spare for interviews. In addition to gender and immigrant worker aspects my research, quotidian practices taking place between various state officials and immigrants urgently requires further research. Such research would provide insightful data on structural violence and on ways in which immigrants are excluded from opportunity structures in Turkey. Such a study would also provide further insight into institutionalized racial discrimination.

Creating New Spaces

The creation of »new spaces«, and the formation of new group identities has resulted in a considerable amount of scholarly attention (Işın 2002). Henri Lefebvre famously argued that »groups, classes, or fractions of classes cannot constitute themselves, or recognize one another, as ›subjects‹ unless they generate a space« (1991: 416). In other words, the construction of new spaces is an inherent social dimension of group making. Individuals who come together as groups need their own spaces which in turn enables the intensification of solidarity (Işın 2002: 31).

Due to the rise in the number of African immigrants living in places around Tarlabaşı, quite a few new restaurants, call centers, hairdressers, and night clubs, run by African immigrants have been opened in the area over the past ten years. Along with the services they provide, these commercial facilities are assuming an additional vital public function: Immigrants not only use these various commercial services these businesses offer, such as making phone call, eating or getting their hair cut, but also use these spaces to meet, and socialize with other migrants. In fact, most of the migrants use these spaces, primarily for socializing

purposes. Some places run by Turkish people can also be popular hang-out spots for African immigrants. A limited number of the night clubs on İstiklal Street, a popular entertainment street, are also known for their many African costumers.

The international call centers, hair dressers, and restaurants are in the less crowded and impoverished/under privileged/ places around Tarlabaşı and Taksim, places on İstiklal Street have become a gathering place for the African immigrants, and often turn to be more significant spaces for the formation of their group identity. The following section describes one migrant public space in Istanbul by focusing on various types of activities that reflect group formation of African migrants that occur in this space.

Amina's restaurant: A public space for immigrants

»Amina« is an African restaurant in Tarlabaşı, a crime and gangster ridden lower class inner city slum, once home to Istanbul's non-Muslim minorities. After the 80's, the neighborhood witnessed high rates of internal migration, consisting mainly of Kurdish immigrants. Tarlabaşı is a cosmopolitan place where Kurdish immigrants, some non-Muslim Turkish citizens, Iraqi, Iranian, and African immigrants are living.

Amina African Restaurant & Shop is one of the many Nigerian restaurants in Tarlabaşı. It is a popular place for immigrants, especially Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Tanzanians. The restaurant is situated in a very old building on a busy street. The ground floor houses a Turkish coffeehouse, where the men play card games. Behind the coffeehouse, there is call-center where people can make international phone calls at lower prices to their home countries.

The restaurant is located in an upstairs apartment of the old Tarlabaşı building. The apartment has three rooms: a larder, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Upon entering the apartment, the main room of the restaurant is located just to the right. The room has no door, but there is a TV with a VCR player right next to the entrance. A showcase which stands to the right of TV displays whitening powder and fake hair, waiting to be sold. Since these products particular to the African market are sold too, the apartment-come-restaurant is also known as a shop.

The tables and the chairs are arranged so that everyone can see the TV wherever they sit. Accordingly, the middle of the room is empty. Located to the left of the entrance is the kitchen which is relatively small for a restaurant. Next to the kitchen are the toilet and the larder. The lar-

der also serves as bedroom of the restaurant's waiter. There is a main floor, which lies between the main room of the restaurant and another room, which constitutes the smoking section.

Amina, the owner of the restaurant has prepared a green and white menu, its colors representing the Nigerian flag. The top of the menu says Amina African Restaurant & Shop. Although the menu offers a wide selection food and drink including beer, hot drinks, soft drinks, *banku* with pounded yam rice, *gari,* fried meat and fish, cow tail and fish pepper soup, a famous Nigerian soup, the only things that one can actually order is *banku* with pounded yam rice and soup, beer and fruit juice.

Amina doesn't function like an ordinary restaurant. At Amina's it is not mandatory to order something; on the contrary most of the time, the immigrants who visit the restaurant might watch TV or a Nigerian movie, or chat amongst each other while they wait for their friends. Although Amina is not always happy with this, she generally accepts it.

Another factor that lends the restaurant its commercial character is trading between the use of the space as a market place. At Amina's immigrants not only eat, drink and socialize, but also buy and sell textiles and clothes. Immigrants who have recently arrived in Istanbul bring huge bags of clothes which are bought by customers who sometimes want to financially support the new arrivals. In addition to this, the restaurant functions as a shelter for some of the new comer immigrants, who haven't yet found a place to live in Istanbul. Moreover, various religious rituals are also held in the restaurants: in another Nigerian restaurant I observed a baptism and a wedding ceremony.

Discussions and conversations between immigrants at the restaurant reflect the different topics through which the migrants feel culturally close to the Turkish society. Turkish football is popular particularly among the Nigerians since there are a number of African players on the Turkish team. During the games, the sense of Turkish belonging increases among the immigrants through the identification with the African football players on the Turkish team.

Especially on the weekends during the football games, Amina's gets crowded. Although the immigrants aren't very familiar with Turkish pop culture icons, their enthusiasm for Turkish football teams and players is similar to that of Turkish fans. A frequent topic of conversation in male dominated migrant public spaces is African players in the Turkish league.

They also know the names of the African football players from the English clubs indicating that their identification with African players transcends the Turkish national level and encompasses the transnational level.

Furthermore, the African community in Istanbul holds an amateur football tournament with teams representing many African countries. »We found that [Turkish] people here focused on the negative things about us«, Donald, a slender man who fled from the religious riots between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria three years ago, remarked. »We thought that as footballers we could let them know about us in a positive aspect« (Schleifer 2005). African immigrants hope that this tournament will change the negative public image of Africans constructed by discourses plagued by racism in Turkey. Many immigrants come to Turkey from Africa to play football in the major Turkish clubs in an effort to achieve upward social mobility. However, since most newcomers are not accepted in the first league clubs, they try their chances in the lower division clubs. Due to legal restrictions, the lower division clubs cannot provide immigrants with resident status or work permits in Turkey.

Drug dealer as social stigma

For irregular migrants who commonly experience hostile attitudes in spaces also inhabited by Turkish people, creating their own spaces becomes a vital in their efforts to strengthen ties with other migrants and to develop group solidarity. When social pressure is applied by from the members or institutions of host society on irregular migrants, occupation of their own spaces enable migrants to generate a sense of security in an atmosphere of instability. The following account of a conversation that took place in the African restaurant, Amina, illustrates the importance of migrant public spaces in that sense.

The incident took place during one of my frequent visits to Amina's African Restaurant. All of the customers, mostly Nigerian immigrants, and I were sitting in the main room of the restaurant watching a Nigerian movie, imported from Nigeria. Martins's, a Nigerian man in his fifties, interrupted the weary mood with his sudden panicky entrance into the restaurant. »Enough, it is really enough!« he shouted. »I am sick, I am sick of them! What do they want from me?« While we tried to understand him, he continued: »They asked me for drugs, two [Turkish] boys came to me and asked ›do you have stuff ?‹ Just in front of the apartment! Why do you do this, why should I live like this every time?« he shouted. Some customers stood up in an effort get Martins to calm down, but most of the customers were laughing, not at Martins, but about this very common incident, which had started to become a joke among the Africans. Amina, the owner of the restaurant, was among those laughing the most. She turned to me and said, »you see my friend,

this is what we experience most of the time« and continued by joking in her Nigerian accented Turkish with a popular Turkish phrase: "*Burası Türkiye abicim burada her şey var, burada her şey olur* [This is Turkey, this is where anything might happen, brother!]" Then a popular theme of conversation commenced between Amina, some other customers, and I: their regret for being in Istanbul, away from their home countries, and their sense hopelessness. »Istanbul is a faculty, a university for Africans; we learn life here in Istanbul, the troubles of life, how to live here…« they lamented.

The account demonstrates how the occupation and sense of ownership African immigrants have over a public space allows them, in a collective manner, to share quotidian experiences that are heavily influenced by the alienating strategies of the host society. More importantly, collective practices such as group conversations, not only foster the growth of a common migrant group identity, but also assign new meanings to the spaces in which the group conversations (or other practices) occur in.

As this example reveals the drug dealer stigma can dramatically shape the daily experiences of African migrants. Moreover, this social stigma and other forms of marginalization and exclusion, such as criminalization, create a high-level of self consciousness among migrants. Most migrants especially experience this self consciousness in host society public spaces. This is neither to say that the immigrants aim to be totally invisible, nor do they always feel threatened by physical or symbolic violence in Turkish public places. However, the unease generated by stigmatization affects migrants' behavior in public places occupied mainly Turkish people. Immigrants often prefer not to be seen in groups or participate in collective activities in such visible spaces; instead their restaurants or international call centers serve as safe spaces in which migrants can initiate collective activities.

Forging associations and claiming rights

In his study »New Citizens, New Rights: Undocumented Immigrants and Latino Cultural Citizenship«, which is based on fieldwork among the Chicano community in San Jose, William Flores argues that the Latinos forge community as well as rights in their claim for space. By formulizing these as cultural citizenship practices, Flores draws attention to a process by which immigrant groups in San Jose maintain cultural rights and political claims in society (2003: 304). According to Flores, claiming space is one of most fundamental components of Latino immi-

grants' cultural citizenship practices in which »members of marginalized groups are free to express themselves and feel at home«. Latinos create spaces of their own in which they can develop cultural identity constructions, group survival, and community organization. Flores' argues that »without the ability to express themselves the immigrant groups have no ability to belong to the dominant culture« (ebd: 297). Although the African migrants in Istanbul haven't developed organizations and resistance groups in the same scale Latino immigrants in the US have, the ways in which the African immigrants create spaces of their own and use are similar to the ways Latinos use their created spaces to forge cultural citizenships.

While The West African immigrants strongly oppose the boundaries constructed by the Turkish state that separate citizens and non-citizens, they were not able to establish a powerful responsive political tool until present day. Yet again, the existence and survival of African migrants, construed as illegal by the Turkish government, can be regarded as a challenge to the prevailing relations and norms constructed around the division between the citizen members and immigrant outsiders.

As Flores's argument implies, establishing a sense of ownership over space plays a key role in the ways in which immigrants politically organize themselves in their efforts to claim citizenship rights. In the same way, Amina's restaurant serves as a setting in which the Nigerian Association can gather to initiate processes through which they can begin to assert more rights. Although this association was not able to obtain legal status from the Turkish state yet, its members are working to advance the association's recognition through their weekly meetings. The extent to which they can effectively develop strategies to negotiate with Turkish actors remains to be seen.

Since the Nigerian Association cannot develop explicit political struggles, due to the illegal status of most of its members, they seek to gain rights by playing within the opportunity structures of Turkey. The rights which the immigrants seek are mostly and fundamentally related to their status in Turkey. Especially the difficulty of having residence permit, due the restrictive features of the immigration law is a major concern among immigrants. Therefore they demand the transformation of Turkey's immigration law which is at stake in the way the immigrant illegality is produced. They believe that by having residence permits they will be protected from the police detention or deportation back home or to a third country. As such, by having residence permits they would have a legal status in Turkey, which would create possibilities to have access in health services and better housing conditions.

Moreover, the immigrants believe that gaining resident status will enable them to freely move between Turkey and Nigeria, thus facilitating more opportunities for commercial activity between the countries. For example, Kanu indicated that some West European countries give immigrants temporary work and resident permits in return for payment. He told me that the Turkish government should also apply a similar law which would additionally provide economic revenue for the Turkish state itself. He continued:

»[If] the government gets one thousand dollar[s] from every immigrant, they would make a lot of money. Through such a law the immigrants can work and make money and pay the Turkish state for their resident and work permits. It would bring a lot of solution to the problems of the immigrants.«

Considering these types of demands of immigrants, the Nigerian Association tries to accomplish basically these has two functions: First, as a hierarchical institution it helps to a community formation; second through its legal recognition, it helps the community to obtain more rights from the government. Immigrants with higher social and economic status founded the association with the anticipation of obtaining work or resident permits from the Turkish state. However, with little support from the Nigerian embassy the Association was not recognized by the Istanbul Foreigners' Police Department [*Yabancı Şube*] and can therefore do little to assist the Nigerian community in their claim for more rights. Efforts to register the Nigerian Association with the Istanbul's government also failed. Furthermore, none of the immigrants I interviewed indicated that their empowerment efforts had lead to any kind of improvement in their relations with state institutions or public authorities.

Immigrant illegality and unemployment

For undocumented West African immigrants, unemployment and exclusion from the Turkish labor market is of major concern. In general, newcomer immigrants seek and learn about the employment opportunities in Turkey through the West African social spaces they also inhabit. Most of the time their efforts to find work result in major disillusionment when they experience, first-hand, the restrictive legal procedures involved. One example of such disillusionment is illustrated by the unwillingness of companies to pay the financial costs and wade through time

consuming bureaucratic procedures to obtain the required legal documents, such as work permits, for their qualified non-Turkish employees.

My informants have maintained that those who register their commercial activity with state institutions or those who buy real estate can also receive work or resident permits. However, most immigrants neither have sufficient economic income or capital to start a business or buy property. Accordingly, the procurement of status and citizenship is directly related to income and status.

The study »Irregular Migration in Turkey« published by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) is one the few studies about irregular migration in Turkey (İçduygu 2003). This study estimates that in 2003 the number of undocumented African migrants living in Turkey was between 3,000 and 5,000. It also maintains that most of the African immigrants are »overstayers and work illegally in mainly low-paid, difficult and dirty jobs« (İçduygu 2003: 28). Overall, this study paints a useful picture of the economic activities in which West-African immigrants are involved. However, the depiction of African immigrants as an illegal labor force doesn't correspond with my informants' accounts. According to them, there is vast unemployment and a deep-running discontent among the members of African immigrant community, despite the fact that some immigrants find access to various types of income generating activities. As a result of their social isolation, immigrants have limited opportunities for incorporation into the social structures that also lead to informal or formal employment prospects. Moreover, since most Nigerian immigrants are university educated and skilled workers, they intend not to work in traditional immigrant occupied jobs, which tend to be dirty, difficult, and often dangerous. On the contrary, they seek upward mobility and economic empowerment possibilities through employment. To examine the unemployment problem more carefully, the next paragraphs address the role of Turkish immigration law and policies in generating exclusionary practices for the foreign nationals.

The case of my informant, Uzochi, who works in an African restaurant as a waiter, exemplifies how most immigrants with graduate degrees are excluded from employment structures in Turkey. Uzochi has an electronic engineering degree from Nigeria. When he arrived in Istanbul, he started searching for an engineering job. However, without a work permit numerous companies refused to hire him. Most of the employers, he told me, asked him whether he was married to a Turkish citizen, in which case, fewer bureaucratic procedures would stand in the way of hiring him. Similar experiences have led undocumented immigrants to develop reactive strategies to obtain work permits. In my con-

versations with the immigrants, they indicated to me that there are three ways to obtain resident status: employment, marriage to a Turkish citizen, or study. Marrying a Turkish citizen is the easiest way to obtain residence permit, while lengthy and bureaucratic procedures and financial stability are necessary for admittance to university. Amina's story illustrates this situation:

»I found out that before I can find a good job, I had to become a citizen. Then, how can I become a citizen? Whether you marry a Turkish man or you work in company…. The owner of a company can apply for you to get a working permit. In Turkey it is very difficult to get a job; …how can find [one]? So I decided to fall in love with a Turkish man. He is not really [a] Turkish man. This guy is Kurdish. This guy I met when I was working in Tünel. So this guy told me that he wants to marry me. So we agreed to marry. I agreed to that because I would be able to get a good job. So we married, I got my paper I started to look for job. But there were a lot of Turkish people who couldn't find job. And I was thinking how can they give me a job? Even the citizens had difficulties to get job«.

Furthermore, Turkey's EU application process has led to the consideration of new approaches to its asylum and migration policies. In 2003 the Turkish government proposed a draft law replacing the 1934 »Law on Settlement« in an effort to harmonize the Turkish immigration policy with that of the EU acquis. However, the revised law continued to permit only persons of »Turkish descent and Culture« to apply for citizenship in Turkey (Kirişçi 2005: 352). Furthermore the legal refors have significantly impacted on the existing citizenship laws, »particularly concerning the acquisition of citizenship upon marriage« (Hecker 2006: 4). According to Turkey's old laws, a foreign woman who married a Turkish man automatically obtained Turkish citizenship, as in the case of Amina. Due to the increasing number of marriages, the legislation has now become subject to additional requirements. For example, »foreign spouses are now eligible for naturalization after three years of marriage. With reference to gender equality, the right to acquire citizenship by way of marriage is now also granted to foreign men« (Hecker 2006: 4).

Furthermore, in February 2003 a new law granting work permits for foreigners was approved by Turkish parliament. According to the new law, »foreign citizens are now allowed to work as interpreters, guides, photographers, drivers and waiters, as well as in other jobs that used to be open to Turkish citizens only« (Hecker 2006: 4). However, in practice, these legal reforms have little impact on the immigrants themselves. Most of them are aware of the recent changes in the law regarding work

permits but they were still unable to find employment in the professions that are now open to them for employment.

Transnational trade networks

Although many immigrants have limited access to the jobs, some of the West African immigrants participate in »income generating activities [which] occur outside the state's regulatory framework« (Sassen 1998: 153). Some ethnic groups in West African counties such as Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal have traditionally been long distance traders and have established informal transnational trade networks between Turkey and their countries of origin (Brewer and Yükseker, 2006: 57). According to immigrant accounts, transnational trade networks between Turkey and Nigeria emerged in the 1980s becoming the primary source of work for immigrants who could not make the transit to Europe and stayed in Turkey. Throughout the 80s and 90s, Nigerian businessmen have been importing textiles from Turkey to Nigeria and exporting auto by-products from Nigeria to Turkey. Moreover the flow of the people in this transnational network is not only one way; many Turkish business men in the textile industry have also migrated to Nigeria or travel between Turkey and Nigeria. This transnational exchange between Turkey and Nigeria has also generated new job opportunities. Many of my informants are »agents«, or »middle men«, responsible for buying textiles from Turkish producers and transporting the products to Nigeria. Nigerian immigrants and business men from Nigeria benefit from structure the informal economy provides. When they export large quantities of goods, they as undocumented immigrants, unlike formal registered and legal »agents«, bypass many bureaucratic procedures and avoid paying import and export duties.

According to Sassia Sassen, the immigration regimes in the globalized world are contradictory: while a liberal immigration for the elite personal of the global economy provide a flow of capital around the globe, restrictive policies and regulations are set up to prevent the integration of the lower class immigrants into the elite flow of capital and goods (Sassen 1996). In this way, Nigerian business men with higher economic status gain resident and legal permits and can therefore legally travel between Nigeria and Turkey for trading purposes. On the other hand, the majority of Nigerian Immigrants in Turkey are lower status

immigrants and they cannot provide the required starting capital.[6] Therefore although they seek to work in the textile industry, they are unable to get involved in the transnational textile networks.

Conclusion

In the last decades, strict immigration regulations became instrumental in the attempts of governments of many countries to control and exclude immigrants from their respective societies. Following this, it has been often noted that the law, at some fundamental level, creates a condition of migrant illegality, and thus a high degree of social marginalization. Indeed, the legal and political constitution of migrant illegality produces a basis from which migrant subjection to physical violence and labor exploitation can grow (De Genova 2002, Calavita 1998).

These considerations are also in line with how social exclusion mechanisms operate vis-à-vis the groups who are defined by the nation-states as illegal aliens. Although these immigrant groups are the target of social marginalization, they continue to seek means of survival and informal incorporation in the social body of host society. In this respect, immigrants' social spaces play a central role. Drawing upon my ethnographic study, I argue that new public spaces constructed by the African immigrants can be identified as a challenge to the exclusionary mechanisms of the host society. More importantly, the creation of new spaces generates conditions in which immigrants engage in activities interpreted as informal attempts of inclusion. By arranging collective organizations in their own public spaces, the immigrants develop various formal and informal strategies of claim making. Accordingly the new public spaces serve as key sites where negotiations and interactions take place. These public spaces thus become both zones of the public exclusion and inclusion.

Although this study is not explicitly policy oriented, it explores various aspects of structural violence and exclusionary mechanisms the Turkish government exposes African migrants to. Accordingly, ethnographic data and theoretical approaches presented in this study provide suggestions for the betterment of the living conditions of undocumented immigrants. However, given the fact that the immigrants have already

6 I was able to obtain information about successful Nigerian trading networks because those people active in the these networks are more visible due to their higher economic and legal status. Due to their anonymity and illegality, it was of course much more difficult to obtain information and access the bottom and middle segments of African immigrants in Istanbul.

begun to seek ways in which they can claim rights, securing communication channels through which immigrants can articulate and negotiate their rights is of utmost importance.

If we consider that Turkish state neither has a history of substantive rights for immigrants nor has accepted large groups of non-Turkish speakers as immigrants, the path to immigrant engagement through political activism might seem difficult to achive. However, this path is surely worth the struggle.

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