

PERCEPTIONS, CONTESTATIONS AND NEGOTIATIONS ON RACE, ETHNICITY AND GENDER: THE CASE OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN MIGRANTS IN İSTANBUL

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Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic material collected during fieldwork in İstanbul between 2007 and 2009, this article departs from the increased presence of nationals from Sub-Saharan African countries in Turkey, and in three sections looks at how ethnic relations, conceptualised as processes of boundary-making, play out between these migrants and the Turkish majority population. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm and applying an intersectional perspective, the first section looks at how the discourse of the Other in the mainstream is perceived, internalised, made sense of and to some part resisted. The second section 'returns the gaze' and gives room for my interlocutor's perception of the mainstream's ethnicity, while the last section looks at how whiteness is perceived when it becomes gendered. Apart from race, ethnicity and gender, research participants also regarded religion and legal status as dominant markers of identity and difference in the Turkish context.

Keywords: Ethnicity, race, gender, African migrants, Turkey

Irk, Etnisite ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet Üzerine Algular, Çekişmeler ve Müzakereler: İstanbul'da Sahra Altı Afrikalı Göçmenler Örneği

Özet

Bu çalışmada 2007-2009 arasında İstanbul'da yapılan saha araştırmaları sonucu elde edilen verilere dayanılarak, Sahra altı Afrika ülkelerinden gelen göçmenlerin Türkiye'de artan varlıkları incelenmektedir. Makalede üç bölüm halinde etnik ilişkilerin bağlılık kurma sürecinde nasıl rol oynadığı ve göçmenlerle yerel halk arasındaki ilişkilerin nasıl kurulduğu analiz edilmiştir. Konstrüktivist paradigmadan temel alan makale 'öteki' kavramının nasıl kurulduğu, içselleştirildiği ve bazı durumlarda nasıl karşı çıktığı anlatılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Etnisite, ırk, toplumsal cinsiyet, Afrikalı göçmenler, Türkiye

Perceptions, Contestations and Negotiations on Race, Ethnicity and Gender: The Case of Sub-Saharan African Migrants in İstanbul

Introduction

Over the past decade, the presence of Sub-Saharan African nationals in Turkey has increased substantially. While a growing number of Africans come to Turkey for studies and to engage in formal and informal business arrangements, many arrive with the hope to transit the country on their way to Western Europe. The stay in İstanbul, however is often prolonged for a variety of reasons, and given the current legislative framework, that does not foresee their permanent presence; they find themselves in a state of precariousness, uncertainty and insecurity. The logic of transit, i.e. of anticipated onward movement, not only permeates the networks of African migrants, but also practices and behaviour of certain segments of the receiving society. As this article shows, the police – but also employers and landlords (Suter, 2012b) – have adapted practices and behaviour that is in turn mirroring the assumption of Sub-Saharan Africans transiting the country. Nevertheless, as argued in an earlier article (Suter and Baird, submitted) as a result of recent economic and political processes, Turkey has not only become a more attractive destination of trade, tourism and transit, but also increasingly offers prospects of sustainable livelihoods to African nationals. Ethnicity, race and gender belong to the social divisions that shape people’s lives in most social locations (Yuval-Davis, 2011). This article asks the question how social relations between the majority society and these immigrants play out on in everyday life. By shedding light on discourses of race, ethnic and gender relations, this article will conclude that while intersections of these social categories are indeed dominant markers of

boundary making, also religion and legal status powerfully shape social relations between Sub-Saharan Africans and other İstanbulian inhabitants.

To start with a brief look at the societal context in which my interlocutors' perception of themselves and the receiving society has been shaped. There has been very little public awareness of migration in Turkey, and as a general matter migrants have often been portrayed as criminals (İçduygu and Biehl, 2008). What more, the stereotyping of migrants – and of African migrants as drug dealers – has been spread openly, both by daily newspapers and government officials (İçduygu and Biehl, 2008). The public picture on Africa has been scarce, and if presented Africa has mostly been portrayed on Turkish television in terms of poverty, conflict and disease (Özkan and Akgün, 2010:532). Studies among the Turkish TV audience indicate that there is a certain tendency to sympathise with Africans as victims of European colonisation, as well as victims of poverty (Doğan, 2007:441). However, migration in general and migration from African countries in particular have not entered the political public discourse in Turkey (Doğan, 2007:441). As this article shows, African migrants in İstanbul and other places in Turkey feel the effect of this one-sided image with which their states of origin are commonly portrayed. As Murat Ergin (2008) points out the racial framework at play in contemporary Turkish society is intrinsically linked to the European and North American discourse on race, which was heavily drawn upon in the construction of Turkishness after the foundation of the republic in 1923. In this development, while stressing Turkish identity's affiliation to whiteness, "images of Africa (...) have been successfully associated with darkness, backwardness and disorganisation" (Ergin, 2008:844). History textbooks reveal "prejudiced views against minorities, ethnocentrism and xenophobia" (Ergin, 2008:841) while some journalists of daily newspapers - "losing any kind of inhibition" – depicted particularly Africans in very offensive ways (Ergin, 2008:844). Considering this, the Turkish racial framework seems to be deeply rooted in nation building and thus intrinsically linked to national identity.

Compared to the literature on the African diaspora in other contexts (Koser 2003), there is relatively little literature concerning Sub-Saharan Africans in a Turkish context.¹ There are few recent studies focusing on politics and trade between Turkey and Africa (Özkan and Akgün, 2010), however, without consideration given to the migration dimension. In order to amend this gap in literature, the current study highlights the increasing presence of Sub-Saharan African migrants and sheds light on their perceptions on race, gender and ethnicity within a Turkish and European context.

¹Some of the few examples include: Brewer and Yükseser, 2006; Suter, 2012a.

After an overview of the theories of ethnicity, race and gender from a social constructivist and an intersectional perspective, and an introduction to the material, the first section looks at how the discourse of the Other in the mainstream is perceived, internalised, made sense of and resisted. The second section ‘returns the gaze’ and gives room for my interlocutors’ perception and analyses of the mainstream’s ethnicity, while the last section looks at how whiteness is perceived when it becomes gendered. Finally, the article ends with a concluding discussion.

1. Methods

The material of this article is based on the author’s PhD project on African migrants in İstanbul.² Following an ethnographic methodology, the study has been informed by interviews and informal conversations with nationals from Nigeria, Kenya, Liberia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the city of İstanbul. These people were students, traders, entrepreneurs, restaurant owners or people who were trying to make their way to a European country. The interviews and conversations were conducted at different stages of their adaptation process in İstanbul during a total time of about nine months in the field between autumn 2007 and spring 2009. Apart from conversations and interviews the material was complimented by participant observation, media and academic sources, as well as volunteer work in three different migrant support organisations in İstanbul. The locations of the fieldwork were centrally located, in the districts of Beyoğlu, Şişli, and Aksaray, including the infamous neighbourhood of Tarlabası where many Nigerian newcomers find shelter, as well as Osmanbey, where many Sub-Saharan African traders shop around the countless textile shops. All names have been anonymised.

2. The Concepts of Race, Ethnicity and Gender

Let me briefly go through the concepts here before applying them to the field. Starting with race and ethnicity, these two concepts are evoked in societies to account for differences between groups of people, and to justify and legitimate the boundaries drawn between them. The terms are somewhat slippery in its meaning and are used both in public discourses and in academic scholarship with confusing meanings (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007:16). Therefore, the use of the terms has to be clarified for this article.

²The thesis will be published in autumn 2012.

Rather than following the primordial views on race and ethnicity – i.e. understanding ethnicity as something given and static –, the use of the term ethnicity in this article adheres to the scholarship of ethnicity as something that is socially constructed, receiving and altering its meaning in different contexts. At the basis of ethnic identity formation lies the perception of a common descent (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007:16). “Ethnicity is a subjective matter” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007:17) and so what matters is not what there is but what is being perceived. Furthermore, rather than identifying the ethnic identity of a group, ethnicity designates the ethnic identity of a group in relation to another group of people that is perceived and that perceives itself as culturally distinct (Eriksen, 1993:13). The formation of an ethnic identity is usually perceived to be a self-conscious process in which choice prevails. However, Cornell & Hartmann (2007:20) point at the impact of external labelling. Especially in majority-minority relations and in cases of visible physical differences, ethnic identity formation is subjected to external labelling and ceases to be a matter of choice (Törnngren, 2011:42). As such, the essence of ethnic identity construction is the relational nature as well as the emphasis on specific social contexts in which identity formations are couched. Ethnic identity formation can be highly fluid as it is created in encounters with groups that are perceived to be “different”. What constitutes as difference or commonality is established, again, in relations and may be highly situational and context-dependent (Barth, 1969). In every social interaction, thus, differences and commonalities intersect and create an interplay of priorities among them in “master and subordinate positions.” (Hughes, 1945:353-359) This interplay of priorities is hierarchically organised “depending on their weight and topicality.” (Lange and Westin, 1981:214) To conclude/round off the argument, the disposition of the hierarchies shifts depending on context, thus impacting the expressions and signifiers of ethnicity.

The divide between the concepts of race and ethnicity is not a clear-cut one, and in fact some scholars do not recognise any divide. While Eriksen (1993:14) refrains from distinguishing race relations and ethnicity, and instead treats race relations as one layer of ethnicity in as much as it is used as a boundary to designate “us” from “them”, Cornell & Hartmann (2007:27) convincingly list several reasons not to do so. The argumentation has its basis in the European and North American historical development of ethnic relations and in its core addresses exercises of power and domination stemming from the categorization into racial groups at the hands and logics of outsiders. However, there are situations where ethnicity and race overlap which is the case when a racial identification is claimed by the group itself. To be clear, race is treated in this article as “socially constructed ideas about different individuals and groups based on their visible differences.” (Törnngren, 2011:16) The fact that they are

constructed does not prevent persons assigned to different racial categories from experiencing their real consequences (*ergo* race matters). Similarly to ethnicity, the concept of race can similarly work towards the building of networks on the basis of a common understanding and both internal and external identification of race.

Following the ontology of constructivism, gender is generally seen as the specific cultural meaning upon sexual differences are explained, lived and reproduced (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983:66; Butler, 1986:35). However, the meaning and consequences an individual's gender constitutes in a specific location is only achieved in intersection with other social markers, such as race and ethnicity (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983:62-75).

The article will now turn to material gathered through fieldwork.

3. Introduction to Material

Expressions of self-identification and identification in general have been wide-spread throughout all my conversations with interlocutors – despite the fact that identity aspects have not been the core of our conversations. Let me briefly present an introduction on the overall characteristics of such accounts: Despite the common regional geographical origin (Sub-Saharan Africa) and religion (Christianity), my interlocutors were far from a homogeneous group of people. In fact, while they often presented themselves as such (a homogeneous group) in relation to others – i.e. to whites, to Turkish people, to Europeans, to Arabs, and to Muslims –, in other situations they were very careful to point out the social differences between them. Such boundaries were then constituted along the lines of nationality, region and village of origin, socio-economic background, gender, age, family constellation, cultural capital and religious affiliation (such as catholic, protestant, evangelical, to name a few). Furthermore, the concepts used by my interlocutors to account for their understanding of ethnic relations in the context of İstanbul contained shifting meanings, depending on the interlocutor and subjected to the situation the person was dealing with or referring to.

How can we then academically make sense of these shifting meanings? For once, the branch of ethnicity theories chosen urge for the acknowledgment of the social context, of the relational nature as well as the aspect of social construction and of the non-static, fluid character of identity formation. Likewise, the intersectional perspective applied in this article holds that there is no separate meaning of the social categories ethnicity, race and gender, but rather that they are “mutually constitutive in any concrete historical moment.” (Yuval-Davis, 2011:7)

Generally spoken, Turkish nationals were usually identified as ‘white’. ‘White’ however had various meanings that could shift quickly and sometimes stand in opposition to each other. For example, at times, ‘white’ signified ‘Europe’ which in turn came to imply ‘human rights and jobs’. In these instances, this was usually contrasted against Turkish people who were then seen as ‘non-white’. In İstanbul, which for many Sub-Saharan African migrants serves as a transit city on the way to the imagined “greener pastures” of Western Europe, tales of the benefits of reaching Europe were often evoked when trying to make sense of the legal protective as well as the economic shortcomings they encountered in the city. Other times, however, ‘white’ was much more put in contrast to black skin, and on this occasion came to include Turkey as well.

Racial identification has often been implied and sometimes emphasised by my interlocutors when recalling their mistreatment by the police or by the general public. In these situations they would talk about themselves and other Africans as ‘black’ and as ‘blacks’ – almost with a capital B, i.e. not only referring to black as the skin colour but as an imagined community sharing a similar culture, thereby basically insinuating a social category. In many conversations there were traits of essentialising, both on Blackness and on Whiteness. In other situations when discussing issues not directly related to the Turkish society, such as the solidarity among African nationals, the master position of the social identification of my interlocutors shifted towards other social categories. Victor, for example, one of my main interlocutor, would often stress his Nigerian origin when discussing other African nationalities, such as the Somali; he would stress his Igbo ethnic belonging when discussing intra-Nigerian ethnic tensions; and would furthermore stress his middle-class background (i.e. the urban upbringing, the high education, as well the monogamous marriage of his parents) to explain his feeling of being different from most of the other Igbos in İstanbul.

Importantly, images of Blackness (and Whiteness) have been shaped long before their arrival in İstanbul. My conversation partners’ understanding of global discourses of Blackness and the global dispersion of Western and to some part African culture have shaped their minds. How Blackness is lived and expressed in İstanbul and the Turkish context thus has to be seen as a glocal version of particular racial and cultural relations, i.e. a version that is particularly local but deeply influenced by the global (Listerborn, 2012). In sum, the meaning of being dark-skinned African in İstanbul (Turkey) is subject to the intersection of various social categories – ethnicity, race, religion and legal status (and later on also gender) – which are composited of local

reflection of a global hegemonic interpretation as well as by location-specific understandings.

Let us now firstly have a look on how Sub-Saharan African migrants experience treatment in Turkish everyday life and how they make sense of it.

4. On Treatment by the General Turkish Public

My conversation partners' accounts of the treatment they receive by the general Turkish public in their everyday life in İstanbul is rather diverse. However, there is a clear emphasis on boundary making perceived from the Turkish side, a boundary that is expressed in different ways – from looks to verbal insults to mistreatment to desire. In most of the accounts on contacts with Turkish nationals, my interlocutors perceived their skin colour to be an issue; it seems to trigger all sorts of conscious or unconscious associations involving stereotypical representations of Africans as a curiosity, a threat, as uncivilised, as overly sexualised, while Africa as a continent was one-sidedly referred to as war-torn and poor. Many interlocutors complained about open disrespect – including uninhibited curiosity.

The Congolese student Etienne has spent several years in İstanbul and speaks Turkish fluently. He says: “People on street come forward to me, they touch me, my arm, my skin, my hair. They are curious, but in a bad way. And they call us: *aşag*, *zenci*, *yamyam* (slave, nigger, cannibal).” He explains: “This is why all the African students always have headphones in their ears; always listening to music, so we don't have to listen to the people on the street. Turkish people think black people are just good for sports and music. When they see a Chinese, they say ‘Jackie Chan’, they say ‘slave’ to us. You know what is the biggest difference between a Turk and a French man? The French man don't ask me whether I sleep in the streets, they know that we are humans” (16 and 17 November 2007).

His friend Stan adds: “I met my [European] girlfriend in the coastal town at the hotel I was working during summer. We fell in love and shortly thereafter she came to visit me in İstanbul. When we were walking in the streets, sometimes cars stopped, and people were shouting stuff at us. My girlfriend was really shocked, and asked ‘why are these people behaving like this?’ – I just said ‘welcome to my world’” (19 November 2007).

The Nigerian football player, Tony, whom I get in contact with at a call shop in Laleli shared his experiences: “They don't want to see a black guy with a white girl. I was in the bus once talking to a Turkish girl, an old guy came and threatened to kill me. The girl was forced to move

away from me. I did not do anything, it is just because of this” – he points at his skin (14May 2008).

Both men and women experienced degrading treatment by regular people on the street, and both men and women noticed a certain sexual interest in them. Many men told me they were asked by Turkish men to arrange for a meeting with a black woman, while many women, experienced (verbal) sexual harassment on the street. Several female interlocutors were mothers of young children, and in many cases the father was absent due to separation, deportation, onward migration or simple negligence. Most of them agree with the Kenyan woman Sally’s observation that “They don’t like us blacks, but they love our babies.” Several female conversation partners stated that the presence of their child makes their encounters with the general public easier. As Tina from Liberia, mother of a little boy, says: “If I go with him, people don’t stare at me, and the police leave me alone. He speaks Turkish to them, and they like him.” As Tina’s statement reveals, the migrant children are usually fluent in Turkish, and often translate for their mothers or parents navigating their way in the city. In a longer conversation about safety and police behavior in the city, Tina makes the explicit point of her child as her protection.

On contacts with the Turkish police

Dark-skinned African migrants are not only targets of the wider public’s curiosity and occasional hassle, they are also often targeted by the police with various forms of harassment through robbing and beating, threats of detention and deportation and occasionally even assaults amounting to death.

The fear of the police was omnipresent among my research participants. The vast majority of people I talked to stated that the police behaviour in Turkey towards Africans was a problem. In August 2007, the İstanbul-based human rights association Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly (HCA) declares in a press release (2007) that they have received an increase in complaints concerning the police behaviour against Africans in connection with the murder of Nigerian Asylum seeker Festus Okey.³ Aversion against the police seemed

³Festus Okey has been arrested on 20th August 2007 in the district of Beyoğlu, allegedly for possession of drugs. A few hours later he was shot dead at the Beyoğlu police station with a police bullet. The police officer claims self-defense. In December 2011, the police officer was sentenced to 4 years and two months imprisonment on charges of “negligence killing”. The trial was heavily criticized by human rights

to be more pronounced among the Nigerians than other African nationalities I met. The anecdote of a police visit to an apartment of Kenyans illustrates this.

During a visit to the Kenyahouse in early March 2008, I see the three civil police men standing outside the building again. Just one week ago, they entered the Kenyans' apartment, wanting to see everybody's passports and visas, inquiring about my presence. Already then, Ruth and the other Kenyans present impressed me with their friendly, jokingly attitude they displayed vis-à-vis the police men. "Çay istiyor musunuz? [Would you like to have some tea?]" Mary for example asked teasingly when they entered. The policemen laugh heartily at the boldness, and pinches playfully into the cheek of Ruth's child. They inquire about her father, "Afrika'da [in Africa]," Ruth replies. "But why in Africa, there are no jobs there, only war," one police man jokes, and his colleagues join him in laughter. Afterwards Ruth explained: "I don't fear them, you know, if they want to take me they take me. We also tell them: 'Afrika savaşı' [Africa war], most of them are nice."

As can be seen in the anecdote above, many migrants tapped on the stereotypical discourse on Africans in order to increase their safety (Suter, 2012b).

Among the interlocutors, there were a number of individuals who obtained Turkish citizenship or who had a residence permit based on employment contracts. Also they noted discriminating and threatening behaviour by the police – until they presented their residence permit and loudly claimed their rights.

Tony is from Nigeria and has a contract with Turkish football club. Visibly enraged he recalls an encounter with the police: "Two months ago I was in a call shop in Kurtuluş, there were about fourteen people there. Then, all of sudden, the police came on the motorbikes, the red and black ones [uniform]. They did not ask for passports, and they did not ask for kimlik,⁴ no, they asked for money! So, their question is not: 'where is your passport', their question is: 'How much money do you have?' They threatened that they would put drugs on the people that refused to give them money, and then arrest them. (...) I was the only

organizations and the verdict is seen as an evidence of the discrimination against immigrants in the country.

⁴*Kimlik* translates as identity card.

one of all of them that had legal papers, so I could be bold. I asked them what right they had to ask for money and refused to pay. They told me to leave the place. All the other ones had to give their money, and the police collected about 700 US dollars from them that day. They usually go to Internet cafés and call shops because they know that this is where Africans hang out. If you are bold, they let you go, they get scared. They only take the ones that look panicked.” (14 May 2008)

Nicole from Nigeria is a legal resident of İstanbul since more than ten years ago. “In Turkey, I learned how to defend myself!” is one of the first things she tells me. To exemplify she tells me the story of the police knocking on her door very early during her stay in the city. Again, just as the football player, she had the legal documents and could be bold. “I asked them if they have a warrant,” she snorts obviously enraged, “and since they did not want to show it to me, I refused them entry. The next day I went to the police station to file a complaint. I told them: ‘Is this really how you treat immigrants in this country?!’”

These last anecdotes suggest that there has been a racialisation of irregular status with the result that – at least for Turkish police officers – black skin per se implies irregular status, and therefore rightlessness. However, as the example of the football player indicates, given that the police demands money also points to İstanbul’s state as a location of transit for many Sub-Saharan Africans. Being in transit is not only an indication of a precarious legal status (often irregular), but also of the presence of money which is needed to manage the next leg of the journey (Suter, 2012b).

5. Perceptions of Turkish Ethnicity

In the following pages, I will present material that shows how Sub-Saharan African migrants look upon their stay in İstanbul. The examples given to the reader reflect both an imposed and chosen position of these migrants in the Turkish society. Given the stated overall focus of my fieldwork on migrants in transit, notions of Europe, of whiteness, and of job opportunities were very frequent and hardly surprising. What is interesting, however, here is how these notions of geographical places, of hope and hopelessness, of “good and bad” were connected to the intersection of social categories of ethnicity, race, religion, and, as we will see in the last section, also of gender.

In early April 2008 I get to know Mary at the Kenyahouse, and shortly thereafter I follow her invitation to visit her in the textile shop in Osmanbey where she just got employed. She lets me in on her problem to prolong her visa, whereupon her boyfriend Paul, who is also employed there, unleashes a tirade of harsh words, ranting about Turkey, about its

people and about their mentality. “And you know, they even think they are white!” he crests his speech, “they will never be able to join the European Union!” – “Arabs are better,” Mary endorses his point drawing on her experiences from Syria where she stayed before arriving in Turkey. “But the Turks are neither Arabs nor Europeans, so what are they then?” Mary gives us a questioning look. “They have to be something,” she ponders. “They are confused people,” Paul summarises, having lost much of his anger by now, shaking his head. “Yes,” Mary agrees, “they want Africans to have papers, but when we go and apply for them they refuse. They are stupid, the Turks. If we had papers we would pay taxes. But, you know, the people see our skin colour and think that we are poor” (16 April 2008).

This short excerpt from a longer conversation very aptly directs attention on the question of Turkish ethnicity as seen from my interlocutors’ point of view. Obviously, whiteness here is understood as something positive, something, however, for which Paul and Mary do not think Turkish people qualify. Furthermore, European versus Arab origin was often made into social categories with contrasting meanings. Depending on the holder of the opinion, the value-setting shifted from negative to neutral to positive, and was largely connected to the holder’s previous experiences of life in an Arab country. Thus, individuals with migration and work experiences from Syria and Lebanon also talked about the Arabs and their identity and tried to position Turkey as the same or as the opposite. Unlike Mary, Caroline viewed Turkish people as belonging to the Arabs, pointing at the food as one indication thereof.

Caroline, a Nigerian woman in her forties, lived in Lebanon a couple of years prior to the war in 2006. After two years in İstanbul she concludes that Lebanon and Turkey are very similar. “The Arabs are the same everywhere, the food is the same here also, ok, but that is because they are both Arabs. I cannot say which place is better; both here and there people are toiling. Both here and in Beirut, they get exploited and not paid for their work. The biggest difference is that it is easier to find a job in Lebanon. Here it is difficult, very difficult” (27 September 2008).

As mentioned before, all of my interlocutors were Christians, and the fact that Turkey is a Muslim country was often one of the first statements about their (new) place of dwelling, against which they formed their social identity. In fact, the Muslim aspect of their ‘host country’ was – whenever mentioned – used to make sense of the negative aspects of their life. As the next anecdote of Eddy shows, often it came to serve as an explanatory factor to make sense of the drawbacks of life in Turkey and above all the violations of human rights.

Eddy, an Eritrean man in his late twenties who left his country due to state persecution on religious grounds, spends much of his time praying and reading the Bible, both alone and in group. In late April 2008 I join the East-African church for the celebration of orthodox Eastern. At dinner, Eddy tells us that he soon has to go to Izmir, in order to register there, as the coastal town has been assigned to him as his satellite city⁵ during the asylum process. Eddy, however, would prefer to stay in İstanbul where he has a part-time job and where he is participating in the activities of the East-African church. He takes the opportunity to ask the invited guest, the Pastor of an officially recognised church in İstanbul, whether he could write a statement to the police requesting his stay in the city. When the pastor tells him apologetically that prior requests have not produced a positive result, Eddy sighs: “Yeah, you know, they are Muslims” (27 April 2008). Six months later, I meet Eddy again in Athens. I ask him about the difference between İstanbul and Athens, and he replies: “Maybe it is more difficult to get a job here, but spiritually I feel much better here. I cannot explain it really. Maybe because this is a Christian country, or maybe because it is already Europe” (9 October 2008).

Eddy has not been the only conversation partner that viewed Turkey’s official religion as an explanatory factor for all kinds of negative experiences in the country. It was very common that interlocutors would talk about a negative event during their stay in İstanbul, only to finish their sentences with shrugging shoulders, a sigh and a resigned “They are Muslims, you know!”

For others again, the question of religion was not as simple as in the examples above. When Victor pondered on Turkish identity, he – similarly to Mary – arrived at more question marks than answers:

“Turkey is not in the EU, which is a big problem. They don’t respect human rights. And then it is Islamic, a confused Islamic community, because of [secularism], so they don’t go to the mosque. They are neither Christian nor Muslim, I wonder what they are,” Victor remarks with a wrinkled forehead (April 2008).

Thus, similarly to religion, the fact that Turkey is not (yet) a member of the European Union has also only been used in a way to account for the negativities in their everyday lives. When Mary for example makes sense out

⁵ Satellite cities, dispersed throughout the country, are assigned locations of stay for individuals in the asylum process.

of her co-nationals' onward movement to Greece and other European countries, she explains to me:

“And when these people are going to Greece, they tell you it is better. And when you stay there for some time sometimes they give you papers, they have human rights! If you stay here there is no human rights. And the police here, they put you to jail and keep you there for two months, you come out with nightmares. This is why they are going and they are dying in the sea. They go and they work, even if only for small money, but they have small salary and papers in Europe: they pay because they are humans. But here, when you are walking and you are black ... like you are walking on the road and somebody is throwing stones at you, they can pour water from up, anything they can throw, just because you are black.” (April 2008)

In Mary's statement, Europe is depicted as a place where people are seen as – and this view is contrasted to her view on Turkey – ‘human’: this depicted humanity includes safety from harassment (on racial grounds), the payment of a salary for work, and a place where human rights are guaranteed.

Nevertheless, the perceptions of Europe are far from being in agreement with each other. For some interview partners, as the following example will show, Europe – and this time including Turkey – receives criticism when addressing social relations between generations.

One Sunday afternoon, Peter, a Nigerian man around the age of 30, and I are walking through Istiklal street towards Taksim. At the corner to the Galatasaray Lisesi we see an old Turkish woman picking up trash in slow movements/motion. I have seen the woman many times I passed by there, a hard working woman, hardly ever taking contact with any bypassers. Peter looks at her and turns to me in disbelief: “You Europeans! Sometimes I really want to cry when I see how you treat elderly people! You, you just take care for yourself. It is different for us: I have the responsibility for my younger siblings and this is exactly why I am here.” (May 2008)

A prominent criticism of Europe was the colonial past. Several persons hold the belief that Europe owed them something, while others simply pointed out at the European impact for Africa's problematic situation today. Victor was one young Nigerian that expressed very pronounced statements:

“The way the white man came to Nigeria, they came through our local chiefs, offering gifts, offering mirrors, our forefathers have never seen mirrors before, they give mirrors and in exchange they access the whole village and start for slavery. And this is what is still happening up until

now, you guys use what you have, your technology, your sciences, your ... whatever things you have, you still use it to exploit us up until today” (April 2008).

Thus, as can be seen in these last two anecdotes, it was not only admiration that was expressed towards Europe. Ultimately, the approach towards Europe has to be seen in the light of history as rather ambivalent. Pragmatically, Europe was seen as the region where a better life was possible. Emotionally, however, conflicting historical accounts were very common.

Shifting boundaries in a Turkish context

As indicated in the beginning, perceptions of ethnicity are shaped through erected boundaries which are however far from static, but can be shifted depending on the context. Below follow two examples in which interlocutors have found situations that allow them to shift the markers of difference in a direction that is advantageous for them:

Etienne, the Congolese student at one of İstanbul’s universities, tells me how he, in the beginning of his studies, was trying to negotiate his racial identity within the context of İstanbul: “Sometimes I used to tell people that I am from France. Because then they did not see me as a black, they see me as a European. People treated me differently that way. Even though there are a lot of prejudices against Europeans here too. People say they are uncultured and have lost their dignity, but if you are a black, especially from Africa, it is worse, because then you are not even seen as a human being” (November 2007).

The next anecdote of the Nigerian football player Tony illustrates the context-dependency of these boundaries of difference fittingly. His analysis of the situation is the following:

“The Turks distinguish between two sorts of black people: as a football player, they love you in this country. But when they don’t know that I am a futbolcu,⁶ they treat me badly. As soon as they know, they apologize and shake my hand and want to be my friends” (May 2008).

Both examples above show how the understanding of race in Turkey is intersected with different notions. In Etienne’s case it is the intersection

⁶ *Futbolcu* is the Turkish term for football player.

between different parts of the world, Europe and Africa, with a perceived distinct social, cultural, political and economic sphere. This intersection thus allows Etienne to shifting the markers of difference from race to ethnic belonging and to present himself as of European background rather than as a national of a Sub-Saharan African country. In the case of the football player, whose first impression of him seems to evoke the negative racialised stereotype of an “African”, his image intersects with his occupation, which is positively valued in a Turkish context and through that takes over the master position (Hughes, 1945:353-359). Thus the Congolese student’s and the Nigerian football player’s experiences reveal a prominent boundary-making in the Turkish society towards individuals from African countries. For them their stay in Turkey is subjected to constant negotiation of these boundaries, which, as shown through the examples, are rather fluid, unstable, and context-dependent.

6. Gendering Whiteness

This last section will take into consideration the intersection of race and gender, and analyse the social positions this intersection produces. Firstly, I will present the discourse among both male and female research participants on the ‘white woman’, who generally came to stand for European (and North American) women and sometimes also included Turkish women. After that, attention is directed to the notion of the ‘white man’ as imagined and told by female interlocutors.

a) The white/Turkish woman

Throughout many of the conversations in the field, images of the qualities and pitfalls of white woman and white men have been mentioned, and used as contrasting images of the conversation partner’s own ethnic, racial and gender identification. Given that the majority of my conversation partners were male, tales and imaginations about “the white woman” figured very prominently. On the one hand, a white woman signifies a ticket to a “greener pasture”⁷, simply as marrying a white woman commonly stands for citizenship of a European country (or Turkey). It is also clearly expressed by Gloria. When I visit her at her restaurant after the busy lunch hours, she draws the short history of the formational months towards a registered Nigerian association. One of the difficulties the initiative holders encountered was to find a suitable candidate to act as a chairman – one that was in possession of papers. As she

⁷ “Greener pastures” is a term that above all Nigerians referred to when talking about their migration to countries where they expect a better life.

lets me know: “There was also another man that wanted to be president, but he didn’t have papers. So I told them: ‘What?? And with all the white women you are sleeping with, you didn’t manage to get papers?!’” (12 May 2008).

Tales of both contract and love marriages – either envisioned or from hearsay – have been rather prominent points of conversations. Victor for example lets me in on his compatriots’ alleged fantasies:

“Ok, they [other Nigerian men] think that they come and things start happening immediately. Ok, most of them come with the notion: ‘Ok, just come, get a white girl, get married, get papers,’ that’s basically what people here come for. Most of them come for this fantasy of getting married to a white woman; you know, have papers, and dump the girl and go back home!” (17 March 2008)

Many perceived this relationship of ‘marriage-for-papers’ to be unequal, but positioned the power differently. While Victor locates the power with the immigrant’s act of ‘dumping’ the native girl as soon as resident permit is obtained, for Peter the power is located in the position of the Turkish/white woman. One day he mentions a Nigerian man who settled for a contract marriage with a Turkish woman. When I ask him whether this would be an option for him as well, he replies:

“Contract marriage is ok, but the thing is you cannot trust Turkish women. Like this guy that is married, right, first it was only contract, and both agree on that. But now she says: either real marriage or divorce! You see, you cannot trust them.”

His compatriot Victor, however, states that his own vision for a relationship is not based on the quest for papers but on love:

“I am not really asking for much. I just want a life. I want a life. I need a small job so I can calm myself. I get a small place, a private place, I mean it, just me, so I can sit in my house naked, watching TV, you know? (laughs) You know, get a place, get married, I am looking forward to that. Meeting somebody very special, that is a blessing to me, you understand, I pray to God, for that person, somebody who just understands me, somebody who wouldn’t look at this [points at his skin] that I am from Africa. That’s the way people look at us: people look at us as inferior. (...) I am an African living in Europe, and day to day I experience this. Ok, the girls in Turkey, the girls they like us, I have noticed that when I walk (...).” (17 March 2008)

Victor perceives the black person’s position generally to one of a person looked upon as inferior, and notices at the same time the sexualisation of black

man in the streets of İstanbul (as well as in Turkish tourist destinations). In a further discussion on the topic, however, Victor explains the perceived differences between white and black women, and elaborates on the reason as to why he sees white women to be vulnerable which he sees located in the white women's tendency to be open about their feelings and to pursue them:

“The white woman is It's very simple: she is in love. (...) A white woman, just buy her flowers, ok, just wake up every morning and say: ‘Oh, God, you look so beautiful.’ Just make her feel precious, and bang, you have her. And a white woman doesn't hide her feelings, ok, she comes out straight. A black woman, no; you have to do the chasing, the old fashioned way, ok.” (19 March 2008)

As much as white women thus were portrayed and commonly seen as vulnerable and as a means to reach a goal, there was a pertinent image of the white woman as being “possessive”. This perceived characteristic has been taken up every now and then in our conversations.

In Athens, in October 2008, I meet up with Victor again and his roommate Ben. Together they lay out their future life for me: “You know, as soon as I have the passport [European], I will go back to Nigeria. I will travel back and forth, and my wife will have to accept that.” Both men agree that that might be difficult for a white woman to accept, due to their widely known reputation of being possessive.

Also, many months later, when Victor already left Greece and settled with his European girlfriend, he finally tells his mother about the new circumstances: “My mother wasn't exactly happy to hear that, you know,” he tells me on the phone, “she knows how white women are and she tells me: ‘what are you doing, boy? Just watch out and don't get married, you know, how they are lose and how they can divorce you any time they want.’”

Thereby, Victor's mother pointed at another widely spread perception of white women, namely the practice of divorce – something that is very different to the countries the interlocutors come from, and something especially men perceive as threatening.

“They are lose, that's what my friends in Holland, Italy and the UK tell me. You know, they can do everything. And they are very possessive; they cannot accept that black men cannot control themselves and keep girlfriends as well. Then they keep asking those questions, like ‘what did you do?’, ‘where did you go?’, and ‘who was with you?’ And they will divorce you!” Victor spits the words out with distain, “what is that, divorce?!” He is upset.

b) The white man as a saviour

Among migrant women from African countries stereotypical visions of white men were also circulating. In many of these accounts the white man was portrayed as a decent, reasonable person acting as a saviour from this very precarious situation.

35-year old Ruth from Kenya used to work for households in İstanbul, and was able to send money home to her family. But since she gave birth to her daughter, accessing the labour market proves almost impossible. After her separation from the father (another African national) of her daughter, she tells me that she is dreaming of a white man to take her out of her situation. "I don't want a black man anymore," she states vociferously, and adds firmly, "and also, I don't want anyone from the Internet." Before she arrived in Turkey, she was in contact with a few European men over internet, and twice she was supposed to travel to a European country, but when she was refused the visa, these men's mails disappeared from her inbox. "Those were not serious men," she ponders, "had they been serious, they would have come to see me in Kenya." The ideal man Ruth is dreaming of is "European, around 45, willing to settle down. You know, we will pray together, he loves me. He does not have to be rich even, money is not everything" (30 November 2007).

Over the course of the following months, the imagination/notion of the 'white man as a saviour' pops up every now and then.

A few months later again at the Kenyahouse. When I arrive, Ruth and Sally already have company of two Kenyan women. All of them are nipping on a glass of Fanta that one of the women brought. After a while Ruth tells me the story of a Kenyan woman from the village of her parents, a beautiful woman living in impoverished conditions. "She was so lucky to meet a European man. They married, and she moved to his country, he had some money and now she has a good life. They often come to visit Kenya." The fairy-tale like story is sweetly filling the small living room. We are all captured by it – until Ruth adds: "But now I heard, they have a lot of problems, he is drinking too much." The other women nod. They do not comment on the story. The bubble has burst.

On another occasion, some Kenyan women discuss the option of marrying a Turkish man. It is expensive, a marriage goes for 2500 to 3000 US dollars. Ruth, well aware of the power aspects involved in such a relationship, illuminates me on her concerns about this option: "It is not easy, you know, because during the process, he might change his mind,

or he may want more. He can do such things, you know, because he has the power” (21 November 2007).

During a couple of weeks in spring 2008 Ruth looks pale and tired. The worries about how to pay for rent and other basic necessities renders her sleepless. After some chat and a couple of glasses of Kenyan tea at the apartment, she accompanies me to the street. She lets off her steam. The white man as a saviour image gains force again: “Turkish men are not good, especially because they are Muslim. Blacks are not good either, I have enough of them! Now I want a white man, Norwegian or Swedish, just a little happy family, no smoke, no alcohol” (March 2008).

The topic of marriage – both as a contract for papers and declared as an outcome of love and commitment – has come up very often during my conversations with migrants of both sexes.

The aspects of romance sometimes expressed by the women in the Kenyhouse appear in sharp contrast to Victor’s and others’ presentation of the issue, who were much more pragmatically focusing on the ultimate gain derived from this endeavour: legal papers implying mobility and the right to stay and participate in the respective European society. For Victor and some others, the concept of marriage however also evokes directly aspects of cultural clashes, i.e. the legal and socially widely accepted possibility of divorce in European countries that are understood to clash with their own view on the marriage project. Both men and women were addressing the power aspects inherent in a contract marriage.

For the vast majority of my interlocutors access to a stable life in Western Europe, including residence permit and the rights to mobility, is through a person in possession of such papers, i.e. through marriage. In fact, throughout Western Europe, marriage has become one of the few means for foreigners to settle down legally (Timmerman, 2006:125-143). This linkage of the right to residence to marriage is worth highlighting, as it clearly presents a case of immigration legislation giving expression to culturally encoded norms. A Nicola Piper (2003:464) observes “marriage and migration are thus linked to citizenship and to power relations that have evolved historically, and are created and sustained by the law.”

The individuals informing this study were all aware of the small space of legal geographical manoeuvre their passports put on them. Before embarking on the journey that led them to İstanbul, the majority of them have attempted to reach European countries through safer and more comfortable ways. Papers, i.e. a Turkish or even better an EU passport, however are not only important to them in terms of rights but also mobility. There is indeed a linkage between the right to movement and the right to stay (Sager, 2008). As Schapendonk

(2011:107) rightly observes, the quest for papers has become “a destination in its own rights.”

Discussion

The article concludes that everyday social relations between the majority society and Sub-Saharan African migrants form and are formed by discourses of race, ethnicity and gender as the dominant social markers of difference. As could be seen throughout the text, also religion and legal status powerfully impact and determine the course of their social relations.

The one-sided and stereotypical image of Africa and Africans pertaining the Turkish public certainly influences the behaviour of the general population against these migrants. Also, the general assumption of Sub-Saharan Africans transiting the country (rather than settling) impacts on the segment of Turkish nationals with whom these migrants come most into contact; this article presented the case of the police. The stories of many conversation partners suggest that their undocumented status has (at least to some part) been racialised in everyday police practice, leading to the suspicion of every black-skinned person to lack documents and consequently, in practice, basic rights. Nevertheless, some of the research participants have found some ways of deceiving their origin thereby shifting the boundaries and carving out certain advantages for them.

The discourse around Turkish ethnicity seemed to be rather fluid. Generally, whiteness as opposed to blackness meant Europe as opposed to Africa. While some conversation partners included Turkey in the category of Europe, others did not. When the topic came up in conversation with the latter, they stumbled over geographical and cultural designations of European versus Arab and often posed Turkish affiliation concerning these categories as a question mark. The EU or Europe usually stood for human rights and jobs as opposed to Turkey where people often felt confronted with the opposite. Europe sometimes also stood for Christianity which was unanimously interpreted as positive, with the binary opposite Turkey and Islam to be ranked more negatively. However, while depicted as “greener pastures”, whiteness or Europe was often also heavily criticized when addressing issues of colonization, slave trade and exploitation or contemporary social, economic and political relations.

Whiteness itself was often guised in gendered versions, and above all tales and discourses of the white woman were very prominent. Above all, it was expressed that the white woman was desired as a means to obtain not only a European passport but mobility rights in particular. Nevertheless, there was a very pertaining suspicion around the white woman, as both too possessive and

too independent (divorce). Discourses about the white man came solely from female interlocutors and were framed in a romantic much more than a pragmatic way.

To conclude, encounters between migrants from Sub-Saharan countries and the Turkish public are influenced by a one-sided picture of Africa as well as by the prominence of a transit movement of African migrants through the country. Furthermore, these migrants' largely marginalized legal, social, economic and political position in Turkey hampers the exchange of knowledge about each other, and ultimately, the migrants' incorporation into Turkish society. It remains to be seen how the increased economic and political partnership between Sub-Saharan African countries and Turkey as well as potential changes in the immigration and asylum legislation following a possible Turkish EU membership can change and improve the relationship between Sub-Saharan African migrants and the Turkish society.

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