

EMERGING AFRICAN COMMUNITIES IN TURKEY

Dr. Serhat Orakçı



İNSAMER

İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Orakçı, Serhat. "Emerging African Communities in Turkey", İNSAMER, 08.12.2020.



Analysis

Turkey's flexible policy towards immigrants and refugees has various dimensions including an African dimension. Obviously, foreign policy change in the last two decades resulted in immense flux of immigrants and refugees into Turkey. In this vein, Franck Düvell points out that due to economic growth and political stability, Turkey has transformed from an emigration to an immigration country.ⁱ The most known case is, of course, associated with the Syrian War where more than 5 million became refugees. Syrians in Turkey have expanded to 3.5 million people nowadays. However, besides the large number of Syrian refugees, there are other national groups seeking better living conditions by immigrating to Turkey. While Turkey has been hosting more immigrants and refugees in recent years, the number of African immigrants in Turkey's cities has also been on the rise.

The *Immigration Administration (Göç İdaresi)* data mentions that there are 1.5 million Africans in Turkeyⁱⁱ, but this data is seen as problematic since it includes touristic short-term entries into the country. However, it is not possible to give an exact number of African immigrants residing in Turkey due to limited academic studies on the subject so far. In a field study published by Mahir Şaul in 2014, West and Central African immigrants in Istanbul are estimated at 35.000.ⁱⁱⁱ When those from East, Southern and North Africa are added to this figure it may reach up to 150 thousand. When cities such as Izmir, Bursa, Konya, Sakarya and Trabzon are included on top of Istanbul and Ankara, the figure of African immigrants is higher. However, academicians are generally expecting that African immigrants are more visible than they were in previous years. According to Şaul African immigrants are



İNSAMER
İHH İNSANİ VE SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

quite heterogeneous not only due to nationality, ethnicity, religion and gender but their education level and class status also vary.^{iv}

African Immigrant Profiles in Turkey

African communities in Turkey have mostly emerged in the period after the 1990s. A small historic group known as *Afro-Turks*, which formed from people who had immigrated to Turkey as slaves during the Ottoman era, is an exception to this situation. During the Ottoman period, there were African black communities settled in some villages in the Aegean, Mediterranean and Marmara regions, and these communities have achieved integration in terms of cultural aspect such as dress code and language. Today, these black communities are concentrated in cities such as Izmir and Balıkesir and their surroundings. It is understood that Afro-Turks have tried to organize themselves under the name of *Afro-Turks Solidarity Association* (*Afro-Türkler Dayanışma Derneği*) since 2007. The community celebrates a special day called Dana Bayramı every May with the support of Turkey's Ministry of Culture.^v

New African communities in Turkey's mega cities have emerged after the 90s due to irregular migration from the African continent to Europe. It is known that there are immigrants from all over Africa, yet Senegalese, Nigerians, Sudanese and Somalis form the largest African communities in Turkey. While immigration stories vary, some basic aims dominate their motivations: to send money to their families in Africa, to accumulate capital or use Turkey as a bridge on their way to Europe. However, some researchers acknowledge that their motivation for migration is mainly of economic origin, they underline that the routes followed and the intended goals are shaped according to the conditions of the migrants and that they do not target to reach Europe only.^{vi}

Today, it is possible to come across Africans as street vendors selling watches, belts, wallets or as workers in textile, leather or shoe workshops.

Some young Africans work in ordinary public bazaars as porters. A high number of African students prefer to stay in Turkey rather than going back to their home country in Africa after they finish their university studies. They work as translators, consultants or establish their own business that's mostly trade offices focusing on export and import between Turkey and African countries. Moreover, there are hairdressers, restaurant, cafe/bar owners amongst the black immigrants. As it can be understood African profiles vary from the poor to rich businessmen. There are also football immigrants and low profile film/TV casts amongst the African immigrants.

Living Conditions and Socialization

While it was known that African immigrants in Istanbul had concentrated in places such as Kumkapı, Tarlabaşı, Aksaray, Kurtuluş, Dolapdere until recently, this picture has started to change nowadays. Today, African migrants can be seen scattered all over Istanbul due to changes in income levels and events such as urban transformation. However, it is possible to say that some new places such as Beylikdüzü, Mecidiyeköy, Avcılar, Esenyurt are preferred neighborhoods.

African immigrants who lead a quiet, introverted life in general socialize with various activities. The African Cup Football Tournament organized in Şişli Feriköy Stadium, Independence Day celebrations, religious and cultural festivals provide socialization for micro African communities. In addition to such events, mosques for Muslim Africans and churches for non-Muslim Africans provide safe social environment for religion followers. Moreover, entertainment venues, nightclubs, reggae bars, cafe and restaurants are among the other places for socialization.^{vii}

Studies on the subject draw attention to the fact that African immigrants have some difficulties in adapting to Turkish society. It points out that issues such as discrimination and xenophobic maltreatment have become routine in the daily

lives of some immigrants. From Mustafa Olpak's field study we understood that this was/is highly experienced attitude for Afro-Turks as well.^{viii} In addition to verbal harassment and ridicule on the streets, discrimination, maltreatment at workplaces, and immoral incidents are also observed from time to time. African immigrants may have difficulties in renting flats, being forced to pay high rent, or live in poorly maintained basement flats. For this reason, many people live in very small apartments within a shift system called çek-yat.^{ix} African migrants, who are exposed to long working hours such as 12-14 hours in small workplaces, sometimes cannot get their salaries and cannot seek their rights because they do not have the financial means. Unregistered adult immigrants do not interfere with the society because they do not have official documents and they have a hard time in situations such as health problems.

Although the majority of African immigrants are young and middle-aged men, there is a female and children population amongst them. It is known that living conditions are more difficult for women and children. Incidents such as harassment in particular make the situation extremely sensitive. It is known that some of the women who are trying to hold on are university graduates who speak the Turkish language, but are involved in the prostitution sector in Aksaray. Since newborn children of unregistered immigrants are left without an identity card, such children are not included in the education process and they cannot even be vaccinated because they are deprived of health services. Children who are involved in the education process become lonely due to exclusion. Some immigrants experience difficulties due to language barrier but those who attended Turkish courses or studied university in Turkey or have resided in Turkey for many years are able to adopt the society better.

Besides the economic effects associated with African immigrants, there is also a religious-

cultural dimension related to African immigrants living in Istanbul. There are Christian Africans as well as Muslim Africans. Churches especially are the most important meeting and socializing places for Christians. It is important to note that the congregation structures of Orthodox and Catholic churches in Istanbul are changing with Africans. Those who are not included in these sects establish apartment churches in places such as garages and basements. However, this situation causes the people of the neighborhood to react to these churches in some cases. These churches, which do not have official status, are usually organized under cultural center cover.^x A Nigerian religious gathering in a cultural center called Omega Fire Ministry ended with a police raid after some residents suspected a party organized for entertainment despite Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.^{xi}

Dealing with African Immigrants

Cases of African immigrants in Turkey have already become a topic of interest among politicians and academics. Meanwhile the demographic rise in Africa indicates that immigration into Turkey from the continent will increase rather than decreasing. For this reason, it does not seem possible to stop migration, but recording and making it transparent seems the most rational solution for the adaptation of immigrants into their new environment. It is necessary to draw attention to the problems of unregistered immigration and encourage immigrants to become registered and integrated into the society. It is a fact that the negative African image in Turkish society has negative effects on African immigrants too. Such disinformation has triggered xenophobic tendencies coding African immigrants as smugglers, fraudsters, or incapable. For this reason, it is beneficial that a positive image of Africa and success stories of its immigrants should become more visible in the society throughout the mass media.



Endnotes

- ⁱ Franck Düvell, “Turkey’s Transition to an Immigration Country: A Paradigm Shift”, *Insight Turkey*, 16/4, 2014, p. 87.
- ⁱⁱ Gulsum Incekaya, “Africans in Turkey leave lasting impression on locals”, *AA*, 11.12.2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/africans-in-turkey-leave-lasting-impression-on-locals/1001490>
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Mahir Şaul, “A Different Kargo: Sub-Sahara Migrants in Istanbul and African Commerce”, *Urban Anthropology*, 43/1,2,3, 2014, p. 143
- ^{iv} A.g.m., p. 149
- ^v Mustafa Olpak, “Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Köle, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti’nde Evlatlık: Afro-Türkler”, *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, 68/1, 2013
- ^{vi} Helene Marie-Lou De Clerck, “Europe is no longer the only ‘El Dorado’ for sub-Saharan Africans: the case of contemporary Senegalese migration to Turkey”, *Migration and Development*, 4/2, 2015
- ^{vii} Doğu Şimşek, Çabuk Çabuk İstanbul’daki Afrikalılar (Africans in Istanbul), Pencere Yayınları, İstanbul, 2018, p. 22
- ^{viii} Olpak, a.g.m.
- ^{ix} Mahir Şaul, “Sahra altı Afrika ülkelerinden Türkiye’ye işçi göçü”, *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, 68/1, 2013, s. 93.
- ^x Şimşek, a.g.e., p. 40-45
- ^{xi} Takvim, “Esenyurt’ta polis ‘parti var’ ihbarına gitti! Nijeryalıların derneği çıktı...”, 29.11.2020, <https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2020/11/29/esenyurtta-polis-parti-var-ihbarina-gitti-nijeryalilarin-dernegi-cikti>

