

The migrant in a plotted adventure: Self-realisation and moral obligation in African stories from Istanbul*

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the cases of two migrant men, a Senegalese and a Nigerian, who spent many years in Istanbul. Although their backgrounds, personalities and circumstances were different, they both did export-related commercial work in the city. After describing sub-Saharan migration to Turkey and the literature concerning it, the text focuses on the stories these migrants spontaneously presented as they explained why they had become migrants. It was striking that with very different personal details, events and coincidences, both stories attribute the decision to migrate to Istanbul to a traumatic accident that forced the protagonists to change a life that until that point did not involve transnational migration. In the stories the protagonist's ambition, determination and will are rendered invisible and he is presented as a victim. I call this rhetorical *topos* 'great mishap'. It resonates with stories I have heard from other migrants. I interpret it as an expression of compunction, of social responsibility weighing on the actor for abandoning close others in favour of an individual quest for self-realisation.

INTRODUCTION

Since around the year 2000 a stream of migration has created a small, stable and growing population in Turkey of sub-Saharan Africans from

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different countries. These migrants typically spend many years working in the country, the majority in Istanbul. In this article I study the moral horizon of these migrants, focusing on the stories they tell to explain how they became migrants. After describing West and Central African migration to Istanbul and providing an overview of the research conducted on the topic, I analyse these migrants' stories as autobiographic narratives that provide access to a predicament the actors find difficult to express in less allegoric terms. The bind results from the tension between self-realisation and social commitment as part of the migration experience. The information I present derives from my research project on African migrants in Istanbul, which involved uninterrupted fieldwork from the autumn of 2010 to August 2011, and return visits in the summers of subsequent years (more on the project shortly).

The two men whose cases I examine worked as interpreters, guides and shipping agents for visiting African traders, just like hundreds of others in Istanbul from West or Central Africa. Aliou and Ignatius had already worked in Istanbul for around 10 years when I met them in 2010. Aliou came from Senegal and Ignatius from Nigeria, and beyond coming from different societies, they had different personal backgrounds and current circumstances. Their stories point to a condition they share with many other African migrants in the city, even those who have been in Turkey for shorter periods of time and who have lower incomes.

Because Aliou and Ignatius had been transnational migrants for so long, their initial decisions to go abroad had become irrevocable, even though they had never lost their sense of homeland and had never stopped entertaining thoughts of return. Lengthy separation from family and friends had shaped not only their lives but the lives of the people close to them. While by their own definitions they had succeeded, this very success seemed to contribute to feelings of impasse. The moral ambiguity of the situation found expression in the stories they told when they explained why they had migrated. I interpret this need for self-clarification and self-justification as evidence of compunction.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

My research project started in October 2010 with fieldwork in Istanbul. Initially it was exploratory and broad ranging, because little was known about sub-Saharan migrants in Turkey at that time. I focused on migrants from the Francophone and Anglophone countries of West and Central Africa and made a special effort to include people of different

levels of education and religious backgrounds, working in various occupations, and making different levels of income, both men and women (but women were much fewer in numbers). I visited the quarters where they lived, befriended many in public spaces and in social gatherings, attended the churches of the Christians and met their pastors and priests, and spent time with street vendors and in the market stalls. 167 individuals are represented in a summary table where I recorded some standard data about individuals with whom I had extended conversations, and this is a subset of a larger observation base. I made return trips to Istanbul in the summers of 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, when I met new migrants, gathered news and observations on developments, and renewed contact with some of my old acquaintances. I continue to be engaged with the situation of sub-Saharan African migrants in Turkey. With a few migrants from Burkina Faso who ended their migration experience and returned home, I have been able to learn how their resettlement in their home country went.

THEORETICAL SCOPE

Transnational migration has been described simultaneously as (a) outcome of mechanisms that produce differentiation between different parts of the world or different sectors of the global economy; (b) a way for unequal development and differentiation to be maintained and reproduced; and (c) an option that becomes available to some people in poorer countries after the proliferation of market relations (Iosifides 2011: 22). This article brings information that relates especially to the third of these perspectives. At present sub-Saharan Africans are migrating not only to former colonial metropolises and their extensions elsewhere in Western Europe and North America, but also to East and South-east Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and South America (Massey *et al.* 1998, *passim*). Like most migration, migration from the global south is deliberate and planned action for which non-trivial resources need to be mobilised, and not a desperate flight from misery (de Haas 2010: 233). Sub-Saharan migrants typically come from the resourceful and educated sections of their societies and make considerable sacrifices for their moves. Aspirations arising from the enormous income differences between countries encourage foresight, patience and strategising. For the type of sub-Saharan migration observed in Istanbul, the hope for independent middle class existence is of great relevance.

The premise of this article is that the migrants' subjective attitudes are revealed not only in the deliberate statements that they make on

relevant matters, but also more circuitously in the meta-discourses found in their stories. Their autobiographical reflections, especially, provide access to deep attitudes that are hard to make explicit otherwise.

One reason is the contradictory nature of spontaneous reactions. In this respect African migrants are no different from the rest of us. Consider the following example: In a return trip in July 2014, I met a 33-year-old Cameroonian man who had arrived in Istanbul only recently. He had been trained in electrical installations at a vocational school, but as a migrant he had a hard time finding even low-paying menial jobs. Hostile surroundings compounded his difficulties. He railed against the country, cursed his fate, and repeated that he was 'on standby', meaning ready to decamp and move to another country when the opportunity presented itself. But one day he showed up with a teach-yourself-Turkish phrase book that a transient tourist had given him. Beaming with pleasure, he was ready to drill a lesson that he had enthusiastically learned the night before. From one time to another people say different things, not because they want to manage the impression they make on others, or not only because of that. Judgements and opinions vacillate, and indecision is common.

Another reason is that the insights derived from migrant stories are not identical to (nor could they be obtained from) principles that can be elicited from the migrants, or from the reasons they cite for their actions. Certain emotions remain buried in vague ideas, cannot be reasoned fully, and they become externalised only in images and stories. Narrative patterns help us process thoughts about the past and think through future courses of action.

Although it may seem a little far-fetched, in a totally different vein this analysis also modifies a point that New Economics of Migration has proposed to overcome the portrayal of human beings as socially isolated in the individualism of standard economic analysis (Massey *et al.* 1998: 21). The 'New Economics of Migration' bases its approach on the understanding that migration decisions are made not by solitary individuals but by larger units of people – like families or households, cohorts of friends, age-mates, or communities. Also, people act not only to maximise expected income, but also to minimise risk or to loosen other constraints (Massey *et al.* 1998: 21; De Haas 2010: 241ff).

The case provided here may be taken as an elaboration of this thought, but with an important reservation. Saying that social units are decision makers conjures up the image of a family council where seniors determine who will migrate and decide what collective resources will be used for which purposes. Fieldwork in Istanbul revealed few

situations that match this scenario.¹ Those who migrated as adults (the majority were in their late twenties or their thirties, some were older) had not set out on their journey because of a family decision. Even during the colonial period and in traditional communities, for example in Dogon villages in Mali, young men or women absconded at night to go work on the Gold Coast and elsewhere, because senior relatives never condoned such moves (Dougnon 2007: 57). They returned years later with chests full of European style trousers and coats, fancy hats, shoes, lengths of cloth, jewellery, and umbrellas, personal items they paraded in ritual dances and village celebrations. Communities and households did not act as harmonious wholes, much less as collective decision-making units. Migration decisions were often taken without the support of parents, siblings, spouses or children, and communities were divided over the issue.

During the 1990s a discussion that went under the label 'intra-household processes' in social anthropology and agrarian studies has relevance in this context. It built on the idea that interests of spouses as well as those of their children might diverge one from another.² Household members often belong in multiple, non-nesting social units. The cooperation and joint projects that their ties outside of the household engender put limits on solidarity within the household. Spouses maintain, for example, lifelong commitments to separate kinship groups, which may or may not overlap. Children grow up within age cohorts, and elders may form coteries with stronger or weaker corporate dimension. These social relations entail opportunities for collaboration, affection and negotiation, as they can involve authority, tension or conflict. Where they intersect, they also produce individuation. A person becomes the vector of a unique trajectory that is to some extent self-propelled. Some of the migrants I met had left their spouses behind when they embarked on their journey, because these spouses had their own personal ventures.³ Migrants can also experience frustration because they fail to enlist a close relative in a mutually beneficial venture, as one of my cases will illustrate. The term 'self-realisation' conveys this personal element in a person's social standing, which can entail economic advancement or other kinds of social affirmation, such as those revealed in images of the migrant as a hero or an adventurer (De Latour 2003: 172; Bredeloup 2008).

The sociocultural factors bearing on a migrant's course of action are identified in this analysis not as collective decisions, but primarily as private feelings – attachment, social obligation, ambiguity – manifested as memory and externalised as autobiographical anecdote. Some

migrants recall a past act of personal affirmation urged by the desire for self-realisation and now have second thoughts about it. Their troubled conscience moulds a story using a narrative function that I identify as the 'great mishap'.

The literature on narrativity and emplotment that inspires this exercise is of recent vintage. Carr (1986) developed the idea that the human is the subject of both action and story, proposing that the acts of living and telling narratives continuously implicate one another. Carrithers (1992) was an influential exponent of the idea that human subjects' social existence is constituted through the stories they tell. Peel (1995) pointed out that authors can assume different positions on the relationship between narrative and action, with implications for their research. In this respect it will be clear that the analysis offered here assumes a deliberating subject behind the spoken word, moulded by socialisation and prior experience, but in contingent and unique ways. Discourse, structure or culture do not replace the narrating 'I', the subject, because people have access to alternative narrative patterns.

AFRICAN MIGRATION TO TURKEY

In the 1990s sub-Saharan migration to Turkey consisted of a small number of university students on Islamic Development Bank scholarships. Once the path was opened other students came on their own money. Taking their cue from North Africans, sub-Saharan traders followed suit to source garments, packaged foods, plastics, and other consumer goods. By the early 2000s, a crowd of sub-Saharan residents from different nations had formed in Istanbul. As was the case of the migrations of Senegalese to New York or Nigerians to Guangzhou, China, African traders' short visits were a crucial intermediate step that made Turkey a destination for African migrants (Lyons *et al.* 2012; Ndaw 2012: 80). The traders became pioneers by learning how to obtain visas, what airlines to use and where to stay; by establishing lasting contacts with locals, mostly wholesalers and customs brokers; and by disseminating knowledge of Turkey to prospective migrants in their own countries.

This trade was the outcome of Turkey's changing location in the regional economy and a new direction in the country's foreign relations. Initially a small-scale consumer goods export economy took off in Turkey in the 1980s by catering to the needs of suitcase traders from Russia and Eastern Europe. In the 1990s, neighbouring war-torn Iran and Iraq became lucrative consumer markets, which was also a boon

for trucking companies. The two trends reinforced each other and the scale of the commerce grew, as the origin countries of its international participants diversified. Eventually traders from West and Central Africa joined the fray. Cargo shops proliferated to take over the shipping of freight by air and sea routes, and also to offer solutions to the difficulties arising from the informal character of the trade (Şaul 2014).

In a parallel development, the Turkish government developed an interest in bilateral relations with sub-Saharan countries. It was first manifested in the 1998 official 'Turkey's Opening Up to Africa Policy' document and gained momentum with the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. 2005 was declared the 'Year of Africa', and the same year Turkey was accorded observer status in the African Union. The Turkish government signed trade and economic cooperation agreements with many African countries. In the early 2000s it organised high profile meetings in Istanbul in which top-level African officials participated. After 2009 Turkey opened new embassies and commercial consulates in several sub-Saharan capitals.⁴ Scholarships offered by the government, non-governmental religious foundations or private universities brought many African students to Turkey. The visibility of Turkish soccer teams in international competitions and the headline-making sums that they paid to a few African star players also made Turkey a destination for aspiring sports migrants. The state-sponsored Turkish Airlines scheduled frequent flights to major sub-Saharan cities as part of an expansion that transformed Istanbul into a major air travel hub in Europe. These multi-stranded relations with African countries opened new migration pathways to Turkey.

THE AFRICAN MIGRANT POPULATION OF ISTANBUL AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH

When my African migration project started in 2010 there was little academic literature on the topic. One of the earliest publications, based on a questionnaire administered by two research assistants, is the most frequently referenced (Brewer & Yüксеker 2006; Yüксеker & Brewer 2011). Swiss-German anthropologist Brigitte Suter conducted anthropological fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation in 2007 and 2008, and her thesis was published in 2012. Her principal interlocutors were Nigerian migrants, but included some Liberians and East Africans (Suter 2012). Another anthropological doctoral project conducted in 2004 and 2005 had information on the housing and work situation of Anglophone

migrants before the neighbourhoods they occupied underwent gentrification, but this work remains unpublished (Knight 2011). My first ethnographic description of Istanbul's West and Central Africans reviewed the prior research, including a few pioneering masters theses written in French (Şaul 2013). The special issue of the Turkish academic journal where it appeared included also the first reports in English of newly launched doctoral projects on the topic (Büdel 2013; De Clerck 2013; Fait 2013); Baird (2014) continued the subject of footballers and Biehl (2014) examined urban transformation and the new diversity springing up in migrant neighbourhoods.

Until then, newspaper and magazine stories, which were most of what was written on the subject, presented sub-Saharan African migration as a matter of political refugees and asylum seekers. Researchers, too, were influenced by this perspective, while European researchers were more particularly responsive to the European Union public debate on migration as a public security issue. Both perspectives converged in the image of Turkey as 'a waiting room for irregular and transit migrants' (Yükseker & Brewer 2011: 129). This may have been a factor in the underestimation of the number of sub-Saharan migrants in Turkey, usually at a few thousand. Perpetuating almost a post-colonial split between Francophone and Anglophone Africa, much of this early literature missed that the largest number of sub-Saharan migrants in Istanbul came from Senegal, except for the French theses, which focused on the Senegalese. Some information that should not have been controversial – for example, that many Africans came to Turkey deliberately and were aware of what awaited them; that thousands of them spent several years working in Istanbul; that most Central and West Africans arrived legally on commercial flights and not clandestinely (even if they let their visa expire); that some migrants improved their lot while others aspired to it; or that the major national communities of Africans included a small group of wealthy and educated business people with considerable capital brought from home or accumulated in Turkey, many of whom also held Turkish citizenship through marriage – was largely unknown and found puzzling. The connection of the most successful African migrants with export trade, the interpreter–cargo freight shops–custom brokerage nexus, and the involvement of students in this commerce, were the most interesting first discoveries I made (Şaul 2014). Internal stratification of migrant communities and the large variety of low-paying jobs that sub-Saharans performed in the city were also part of that description. Discrimination and extortion in housing have driven sub-Saharan migrants to live in crowded groups and develop

host-boarder sub-tenancy arrangements, which created another source of income for the older established migrants at the expense of the newly arrived. The largest national groups created semi-formal associations, which mediate with authorities and perform social services, while migrant neighbourhoods also include a few unlicensed and mostly ephemeral restaurants and bars.

In 2011, I tried to generate more accurate estimates of how many Africans, especially Central and West Africans, lived in Istanbul. In my conversations I broached the question with the leaders of the national migrant communities (who under-reported the number of their co-nationals). I also talked to employers, partners, landlords, real estate agents, and others who worked closely with African migrants or knew their neighbourhoods well. I found it most effective to first estimate the occupancy of housing rented exclusively to crews of low-income sub-Saharan migrants (substandard basement apartments) and to then add other types of information. My estimates came to 25,000 Senegalese and 5,000 Nigerians. With the addition of around 5,000 migrants of other nationalities, I estimated the number of all long-term West and Central African residents of the city at around 35,000. The Africans I did not consider – Ethiopians, Sudanese, and East or Southern Africans – probably add up to a comparable sum. Since I made these estimates, things have evolved. There seem to be more Africans living in the city, from a larger number of countries. Single women are now more conspicuous, notably from East Africa and Cameroon. Turkey now harbours two to three million war refugees from Syria. The ‘Balkan Route’, the mass movement of Syrian refugees in Turkey to Western Europe through Greece and Eastern Europe, which opened for a brief moment in August–September 2015, inspired others, including some Africans who had lived in Turkey for a number of years, to take their chances and relocate. Fresh studies are needed to assess the current situation.

My research noted significant differences between the national communities. Although a leader of the community was college educated in Turkey and spoke a polished Turkish that embarrassed his local business partners in addition to French, the majority of the Senegalese in Istanbul had little or no formal schooling, a sharp contrast with the other West or Central African migrants. Consequently, they didn’t speak French (or spoke it poorly). Some had a smattering of English from earlier international travel, but those who had lived there at least a year had learned Turkish well enough to function. They came from urban areas of Senegal, mostly from the large peripheral districts of Dakar. Many had backgrounds in small commerce as store or repair shop

owners of various sorts. As a rule, they were married young men with children who had left their families in Senegal. Women were a minority in the migrant community. The women I met, whether married or single, had many more years of schooling than the men.

The Senegalese migrants were averse to wage-earning jobs. Even when they managed to find work in the cargo/freight brokerage shops or were 'hired' in wholesalers' galleries as interpreters and sales agents, in reality they were independent contractors paid a commission on the business or consignments they secured from African customers. The newly arrived started invariably as ambulant vendors or stall keepers in periodic marketplaces, with the support and guidance of established migrants. They had generally brought from home the minimum capital they needed for this enterprise (at least \$1,000). Vending provided better income than the precarious jobs other African migrants relied on. It also allowed for autonomy and dignity, and saved them from exposure to cheating by employers. The Senegalese wore their Muslim religion with pride, and were flustered when they sensed that locals treated them as novice converts. Perhaps more than half belonged to the Mouridiya, the popular Senegalese sufi brotherhood, but the group included a variety of ethnicities and religious orientations.

The Nigerians in Istanbul were mostly Igbo. The only non-Igbo Nigerian migrants I met were those who had come as fellowship students or as football aspirants, and some single women from Edo State (see footnote 1). They gather primarily in the big Catholic church in Beyoğlu, St Anthony, which had a Nigerian priest who celebrated mass in English.⁵ There were also around two dozen small Pentecostal churches led by pastors their congregations had contracted from Nigeria (though one pastor was from Ghana, one Pentecostal church was Francophone, and two others were founded by native Turkish pastors). The Nigerians in Istanbul were highly educated; both men and women typically held college degrees. They were also trade oriented, which is a strong part of the Igbo self-image (Şaul 2014). Other African migrants stereotype them as ambitious and coveting. Nigerians owned the most businesses belonging to Africans in Istanbul, and some of these were licensed, formal companies. Some younger Nigerians worked for Nigerian bosses who were connected by transnational networks to relatives, fellow countrymen, and partners in Nigeria and other parts of the world. The two cases I describe in this article explain how some of these firms operate. The rest of the Nigerian migrants in Istanbul, including many sports aspirants, worked mostly in short term or daily manual jobs while trying to build the

social capital, knowledge and small savings that would help them climb to the station of the successful examples.

As Turkey transitions from an emigration to an immigration country, its researchers are bound to rethink transnational mobility (Düvell 2014). Nevertheless, the earlier view of the migrants as political asylum seekers or the supposition that sub-Saharan Africans come to Turkey just to transit to Europe linger in the research literature (Fait 2013; Şaul 2014; De Clerk 2015). As a consequence, the growing body of writings on sub-Saharan Africans living in places such as Guangdong, Dubai or New York find no echo in it (and one could add Japan, India or Malaysia), while they would greatly illuminate the situation in Turkey (Şaul & Pelican 2014). The Turkish context of this migration is gradually coming into sharper focus (for example, see Angey-Sentuc 2015, on the flow of African students to Turkey and the Gülen movement connection). Its African context needs to be better explored, especially African participants' subjectivities and the cultural and historical process underlying them, which is partly what I propose to do in this article.

ALIOU

Aliou, a 40-year-old Senegalese migrant, had made a home in Istanbul for about seven uninterrupted years. He had not been able to leave Turkey at all, having lived there all those years with an expired visitor's visa. If he had tried to leave he would have been assessed a heavy fine, in proportion to his years of illegal residence, and banned from receiving a visa to return to Turkey. As long as he stayed in Istanbul, however, his legal status did not impede his commercial activities. To fully grasp Aliou's aspirations and how he saw his migrant experience, it is helpful to dwell on his formative years and the circumstances that brought him to Turkey. The following account is based on his words, some of which I take at face value as simple statements of fact, and others I scrutinise for cues to self-understanding and self-realisation.

Aliou was tall and had the heavy build of the people of coastal Senegal. He was born in Mbour, a city about 80 kilometres south of Dakar. Mbour was a place where most people lived on fishing and related activities, now better known as a tourist centre with beautiful beaches. Aliou's father, a fisherman, sent him as a youth to live with an aunt in Thiès, to attend school and escape the shared poverty of the area. In this larger city Aliou finished middle school and then a vocational high school, graduating as a trained mechanic.

This background made Aliou one of the most educated members of the Istanbul Senegalese community. Unlike the majority of his migrant fellow countrymen belonging to Tijani or Mourid families, who had only rudimentary Quranic training, Aliou deployed his French skills in keeping careful personal records of his past and present transactions.

After graduation Aliou had a variety of factory jobs, repairing and building machines. He was dissatisfied with the pay, however, and on the lookout for a different kind of opportunity. His break occurred when he became the manager of a petrol station that serviced fishing boats.

The petrol station belonged to a wealthy businessman who was an absentee owner, and Aliou was paid a percentage of the cash receipts of the outfit, not a simple salary. It resembled informal employment contracts encountered in West Africa and common among the migrants in Istanbul as well, somewhat analogous to a sharecropping arrangement, rewarding the employee in good times, but resulting in low or suspended pay in periods of slack. Aliou used his own savings to ease the management of the business, making up for fund shortages when the business owner was unreachable but fuel suppliers had to be paid. He compensated himself for these contributions as he thought fair, in my estimation making himself into a junior partner albeit without the full consent of the owner apparently. Aliou said he had been totally invested in this job, putting in 18-hour days, and making the business prosper. In turn, the job allowed him to accumulate his first material wealth. The employment lasted three years. The owner then changed his attitude and brought in a relative as Aliou's supervisor, constraining his ability to operate. Seeing the writing on the wall, he 'started to pull his share out', meaning perhaps that he withdrew sums from the cash flow of the business to set aside for his own security. Finally, he was dismissed.

At this point, with a little capital in his hands, Aliou started to trade on his own and entered the imports scene. Turkey had become a source of goods for Senegalese merchants at this time. In 2000 Aliou began taking trips to Istanbul. For four years he shuttled back and forth from Dakar, working by himself to take shipments of consumer goods from Istanbul to retail stores in Dakar. Then he found a partner and together they opened their own store in Dakar giving the operation greater scope. The partnership rested on the idea of combining the profits of import trade and retail trade and enhancing both with the logistical advantages of integration. Aliou was going to relocate in Istanbul, source the goods, and ship them to his associate in Dakar, who would run the store there,

sell the goods, and send the trading capital back to him in Istanbul. They would thus avoid the expenses of frequent air travel and short-term stays. I suppose by relocating in Istanbul Aliou also counted on becoming better acquainted with the business life and the suppliers of that city, opening up new lines of commerce, and adding to his income by serving as an agent for other Senegalese importers. His original intention, he said, was to stay in Istanbul for two years. But the partnership foundered and Aliou had to change his plans drastically.

The first cracks in the plan appeared when the partner in Dakar delayed sending him the agreed upon cash equivalent of the goods Aliou had shipped. Aliou dispatched, for example, a consignment worth €2,000, but in return received a transfer of only €1,000, with the explanation that the sales in Dakar had not been good. Then Aliou started hearing stories from friends back home, that his associate had started to live a dissolute life – that he was spending time in holiday resorts, going around with fancy women, and had taken to gambling in casinos. When he married one of the women he dated, things went from bad to worse. The man ended up bankrupt and the store in Dakar was closed.

The collapse wiped out nearly all of Aliou's savings. He took stock of his situation and decided that under the circumstances he could not afford to return to Senegal. He would have to spend maybe another 10 years in Istanbul to get back on his feet. He started working full time as a business guide for Senegalese traders who arrived in Istanbul on short buying trips, as he himself had done during his first four years in the export trade. This was his occupation when I met him in 2010 and he seemed satisfied with the progress he had made. But Aliou did not give up on the idea of finding a counterpart in Senegal, as he had originally envisioned. However, all his attempts along these lines miscarried. He kept a written account of the money sunk in successive failed endeavours. One man to whom he had sent several shipments of merchandise went down owing him 3,000,000 FCFA (about US \$6,000). Another one, following some initial success had abandoned his business in Senegal, only to resurface in Europe totally destitute, and then after another period of silence, called him from the USA. He felt remorse for not paying his debt to Aliou (1,000,000 FCFA, about US\$2,000), and now he was living in misery, but he intended to pay back one day.

Aliou also made efforts to work with close relatives in Senegal. The sums involved in these attempts were smaller, but led to even more spectacular failure. He sent small batches of goods to start a trade flow, but

the people who received them simply sold the goods, took the money, and ignored his pleas for returning part of the proceeds to restart the process. He complained bitterly of the improvidence of the Senegalese and their inability to make long-term plans. Maybe he was running against, I thought, the difficulty of persuading relatives to separate kinship obligations from mutual interest in building a joint enterprise. His case illustrates that household and kinship links do not always support personal ambition and conflicts can arise. In the beginning I wondered if Aliou had not faced a trust deficit by misjudging distant relatives' attitudes. He corrected me by saying that he did not mean distant relatives, that it was worse when you attempted to build a business with your mother or your sister. These people, I concluded, had considered what Aliou had sent them to be their due, like remittances arriving from a junior relation who did well. That is, they received the goods in the framework of the ethics of shared consumption, rather than as an investment as Aliou had intended.

What worked for Aliou was what he could do by himself – provide services to traders from Senegal, guide them and advise them in Istanbul, take them around in the business districts to find suppliers for the goods they wanted to buy, and in the end offer them customs brokerage and shipping services through the small Turkish company with which he was affiliated (now one among the hundreds that exist in Istanbul). This vocation goes by the name *tercüman*, which in Turkish means 'interpreter'. The range of services provided by the migrant agents goes well beyond translation, and Aliou had mastered enough Turkish to carry out these duties reasonably well. I have described elsewhere in detail the work entailed, the kinds of commissions the migrant agents receive, and the nature of the freight shipping agencies they associate with (Şaul 2014).

Aliou showed no taste for subterfuge in his conversations with me and was frank about his work and income sources. He explained that all the cargo shops working with African customers had agreed not to compete with each other by cutting their prices, and all applied the same surcharge to their customers over the per kilogram price that Turkish Airlines charged for freight (Turkish Airlines had captured all the cargo business with daily flights to Dakar). Of this surcharge the guide-interpreter received a share when he brought a freight customer to the cargo shop. Aliou's share was 0.40 TL per kilogram (about \$0.32 at that time). In addition, the guides discreetly received commissions from the stores where they took their customers, unbeknownst to the customers.

An unusual practice of Aliou's indicates in another way his desire for open, straightforward relations in his dealings to avoid unfairness and surprise. In addition to the commissions from wholesalers and the freight shop, he charged the customers he guided a set fee of €50 for a three-day period, the length of time a visiting trader commonly spent in Istanbul sourcing goods. All the other guides I met were too embarrassed to ask for such a payment. Instead they talked about their services as 'help' they had provided, and disguised their compensation as 'a gift' the visitor offered voluntarily at the end of her or his stay. Inevitably this led to varied, unpredictable payments. Aliou's innovation fit his overall 'enlightened' and rationalising orientation, partly related to his character, but also suggesting the mark of his advanced schooling.

Aliou was able to generate more revenue by lodging his visiting clients in his flat. He lived in a relatively nice spacious three bedroom third-floor flat on the main street of Kumkapı, the migrant/trade visitor/freight shippers hub of intra-muros historical Istanbul. Just before settling in Istanbul Aliou had married in Senegal a woman 12 years younger than him and had brought her with him. To have her living with him in this apartment was a privilege, which the majority of Senegalese migrants who had left their families behind did not share. Her female touch was evident in the way the apartment was decorated. He charged his trader customers €30 per day for room and board (€40 for a team of two people – typically two business associates, not a couple), which many must have found more agreeable and certainly cheaper than staying in a hotel.

Aliou had a 'plan'. It was a word he used frequently. His plan was to return eventually to Senegal to open two retail stores there. One store would sell garments, the principal export item Istanbul supplies to the overseas African market. The other would sell household and kitchen articles, especially plastic goods such as plates, cups, basins, bowls, and utensils, for which he thought Turkish industry had an unbeatable price/quality advantage and there was constant demand for them in rural and urban Senegal. He fancied having two cars, or at least one reliable car to service the stores, and to take frequent trips to Turkey to keep them well supplied. He said he was close to reaching the financial goal required to realise this objective; he needed two, maybe three more years.

IGNATIUS

Owning a formal business in Turkey without having first become a Turkish national by marrying a Turkish citizen was a rare achievement

among African migrants, but there were a few Nigerians who had managed to do it, a feat some of them attributed to the smarts of the Igbo. Ignatius was one such business owner. Besides being universally recognised in the large Nigerian community in Istanbul, he had extensive contacts among the volunteers who provided social services to the migrants. It was someone within this social service network who directed me to Ignatius early in my fieldwork. The contrasts between Aliou and Ignatius were many: not just that one was a fairly secular Muslim Senegalese and the other an involved Pentecostal Christian Nigerian, nor that Aliou was a solo operator and Ignatius the boss of a commercial outfit with a sizeable warehouse and several employees. The contrasts were also apparent in the transnational span of Ignatius' business interests versus Aliou's more limited focus on the Senegal–Turkey axis. Yet, there were parallels between them as well, and one of them is highly relevant to this article.

I met Ignatius at his place of business in Osmanbey, a neighbourhood on the northern side of the Golden Horn. Osmanbey is more upscale than the Kumkapı–Laleli zone where most migrants are concentrated. During the past two decades, a portion of this neighbourhood between its major arteries turned into a wholesale garment sales area for visiting traders from North Africa, Eastern Europe, Iran, the Arab Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, although the area remains flanked by some very patrician residential areas. Ignatius's warehouse was not in one of the wider streets lined with well constructed buildings and showy store windows, where signs are now displayed in Cyrillic and Arabic scripts. His was somewhat downhill, in one of the narrower service backstreets. In the large open floor space of the warehouse, next to one of the walls, a kitchen and tea station had been fashioned on an L-shaped counter. Ignatius was standing there when I met him, preparing a stew, I realised later, which he offered me for lunch and turned out to be delicious. Subsequent visits revealed that the place also had a large basement for storage. The main floor was used as a staging area to prepare the large bales packed in canvas for the African airfreight customers. He also sent goods by sea in containers. In his office one might encounter an agent of one of the large shipping companies there to receive payment. Near the entrance half a dozen young African employees sat on makeshift seats or on packing boxes when they were not busy readying parcels or running errands with Ignatius's pickup truck. Like Ignatius they were all Igbo and, if not his relatives, they were fellow countrymen hailing from his family's village or from its vicinity in Nigeria. Ignatius had brought them to Istanbul,

and his solicitude for them was evident in his persistent search for residence and work permits on their behalf.

On that first visit he took me to his office on a mezzanine floor covering the back third of the warehouse. We approached it with a steep metal stairway of twenty steps. A glass wall afforded a full view of the front part of the warehouse from the desk chair. Next to the desk a large monitor mounted on the wall displayed several images generated by the multiple security cameras installed in the warehouse and basement. Pentecostal church music streamed from the computer speakers. The back wall displayed a framed letter from the Ministry of Interior acknowledging the receipt of Ignatius's Turkish citizenship application. Once, when a Senegalese man who had obtained citizenship by marrying a Turkish woman came into his office on some business, Ignatius pointed out the letter to me and mumbled, wondering why he had not received a reply from them after so long.

Ignatius had solved the vexing issue of gaining legal residence and a work permit many years earlier, and was operating a licensed business. How he had managed this was naturally difficult to understand, even though he was not totally secretive about it. Legal residence is within reach of most foreigners provided they have entered the country legally and kept a valid visa all along, but it is costly. The vast majority of migrant workers I encountered in 2010 and 2011 had let their visa lapse shortly after entering the country, and thus were unable to regularise their residence status without leaving as irregulars and attempting a legal re-entry. Work permits, however, seemed impossible to obtain. Ignatius explained that a person could start by enrolling in the Social Security Administration to receive a registration number, which would be issued apparently without reference to a work permit. They would then comply with the contributions required for the self-employed. Once they had breached the system in this unusual manner, they could present requests to the Work Ministry for further steps toward a work permit. Intricate and cunning, but apparently legal, it must have been a course of action that the more astute migrant Nigerian businessmen had discovered some time ago, but Ignatius said that he had been the first to think about some of these procedures and had thus opened new paths for others.

Very few migrants own their own business place and I was not privy to Ignatius's affairs. On one visit a south Indian man was standing in his office. Although Ignatius had not told me about him before, he presented this man as his partner. Clearly his enterprise was several notches above Aliou's, although he kept a modest migrant lifestyle with no ostentation.

Ignatius performed many of the tasks migrant interpreter guides do, such as taking visiting African traders to stores and showrooms, running errands with them, and even meeting them at the airport and ferrying them to their hotels. He was interested in providing room and board, too, and said that his next project was to open a small hotel for visiting traders. The advantage of this arrangement, besides the extra earnings, would be in restricting the visitor's ability to socialise since a guide's profits depend on the visitor's lack of knowledge and contacts. Besides commissions, Ignatius earned a larger proportion of shipping fees than Aliou, because he dealt directly with the airlines and boat companies. In addition, he could handle a larger volume of business thanks to his warehouse and his employees. Besides Nigeria, he had customers from Kenya, Gambia and Senegal. Breaking the Anglophone/Francophone barrier is the ultimate masterstroke, and Ignatius was about to begin French classes offered by a charity supporting migrants in Istanbul (the classes did not materialise for another year, however, because the service could not secure a classroom).

His regular visa situation allowed him to travel extensively. He took trips to California and to China. On one trip he had imported brand-name clothing. He had plans to import to Turkey leather jackets made in China for the US market (Turkey is generally recognised as a successful exporter of leather goods). He wished he had more time to explore such opportunities, to start offices in different African countries, and to make his business truly global. His Nigerian wife lived with him in Istanbul, but the rest of his family lived in Nigeria. He had high hopes especially for his son who was about to turn 20. He planned to bring his son to Istanbul to take over the business, which would free him to pursue international ventures.

All of this was an eye opener for me. Meeting Ignatius early on during my year of fieldwork helped me gain some distance from the stereotype of misery and compulsion that clings to most reports on African migration. Sure enough, there was distress and deprivation in the midst of the migrant population of Istanbul, as Ignatius readily pointed out. Occasionally he would take, he said, a sack of rice, a chicken, and some condiments to a group of poor fellow nationals who lived in a crowded apartment, to relieve their hunger. He knew their situation because he had been there. So what were the beginnings of this successful enterprise?

Ignatius told his story of coming to live in Turkey as a migrant in this way: Before he came to Istanbul he owned a store in Nigeria. He landed at the Istanbul airport for the first time in 2000 carrying the hefty sum of

\$32,000 in cash, which he planned to use for his purchases. He stayed at a hotel near Taksim Square, the main hub of the city. The area is popular with visitors and close to Cihangir and Tarlabası, which at that time were run-down neighbourhoods that provided shelter to migrants.⁶ It was meant to be a very short trip. After four or five days of sourcing his goods he would go back to his business in Nigeria. But an unfortunate event struck him. His passport and his money were stolen. How would he return to Nigeria with nothing to show? He decided to stay and work odd, daily jobs. The end of his story was brief. Our conversation was winding down, he did not elaborate on how he prospered, I did not press the point, and in later encounters we did not return to this subject. He pointed to his men, who were packing parcels for a woman trader on the warehouse floor downstairs and said he had been just like them. He sold soft drinks in the streets. From there he was able to build his life again, to eventually arrive at the point where he was now.

THE GREAT MISHAP AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

The drama of sudden downfall in Ignatius's story stayed with me and in time I came to think that similar episodes existed in what I had heard from other migrants. It occurred to me that if these accounts were considered narratives, then the passages in question could be described as a rhetorical *topos*, summarised in the following manner: A traumatic experience interrupts a successful career and necessitates a radical new departure that leads to international migration. This *topos* was especially salient among the more successful members of the migrant community, and I believe that it conveyed significance beyond its literal meaning.

The traumas that made Aliou and Ignatius migrants, according to their stories, resulted from what from their perspective were random reversals. In Aliou's story the coming disaster announces itself in increments: the betrayal of his partner in Dakar; the rumours of his partner taking up reckless habits including gambling; and then his partner's marriage to a woman who had participated in these wasteful forays. Aliou suggests that he could have foreseen where it was leading, but from a distance he had been unable to set it right. The pivot comes when the Dakar business is ruined, the store is closed, and the inventory has vanished, wiping out Aliou's life savings. That emergency requires him to remake his plans for the future; and what was meant to be a two-year stint of absence turned into a project entailing a long-term migrant life abroad.

Aliou could have told his story in other ways. He could have mentioned his growing knowledge of Istanbul's small business environment and migrant milieu, his expanding diaspora of trade contacts, the improvement of his income as a guide/interpreter, his developing confidence, or his ability to grow his savings in Istanbul. He could have given his own judgement in changing courses greater weight. But he did not present these elements in the story. Instead, the protagonist appears as a passive victim of circumstances in a remote place. Likewise, his separation from his first job in Senegal at the seaside fuel distributor (about which he does not reproach himself) carries no significance for his later migration. The improvidence of the first partner is reiterated later in the story in describing the attempted but failed business relations with others, including close relatives, but these serve mainly as echoes amplifying the first major setback that led him to long-term migration in Istanbul, not as factors in that decision.

In Ignatius's reminiscence the setback is more sudden and brutal. Losing a large sum of money to theft shortly after arriving in Istanbul was reported so frequently in my conversations with African migrants that it puzzled me. Larceny was not always contextualised in the same manner as in Ignatius's story, as the reason for becoming a migrant; sometimes it only dramatised the risks and tribulations that the person faced in his land of migration. Changing the train of thought, these accounts alerted me that many African migrants might be leaving their country with considerably more money than they are usually given credit for. It was what they had been able to bring together before embarking on their trip. They had settled their affairs, called in their monetary and social debts, and converted all they possessed into money. Then they carried this on their person to their destination. Several also told me that they were determined to never touch this money. They pretended it didn't exist, and attempted to get by on what they could earn or find in the new place, with the intention of using their money one day, after they had learned their way around and found a good occupation, as profitable capital. This attitude reveals the mindset of many migrants: even when they were able to find only intermittent and very low paying jobs and lived in misery, they thought of themselves not as wage-earners, but as independent operators in a world of possibilities.⁷

Needless to say, in Istanbul many migrants could not keep their money intact, and before they could find a source of steady income to stabilise their situation they had exhausted, or nearly so, the savings they had brought. This being the case, there were unscrupulous

people who knew enough about the migrants to guess who had money stashed away. The migrants were especially vulnerable in their first few weeks, when they were forced to live in close quarters with others and knew little about their surroundings. I still wondered to what extent these stories were true, or whether, for example, the figures were not exaggerated. It is impossible to know. But concerning Ignatius's story and the purpose of this article, these speculations make little difference. The crux of the matter is how he told his story to explain why he had stayed in Istanbul. The veracity of the account is beside the point.

The *topos* of personal disaster forcing the protagonist into migration, which we find in variant renderings in Aliou's and Ignatius's stories, could be labelled 'great mishap'. Adversity takes different forms in the two stories, but has the same function in them. It disrupts the protagonist's prior scheme, a design not involving migration; it ruins his resources, and makes migration the only option. 'Only option' of course is still relative to the aim of self-betterment (the protagonist cannot resign himself to live in poverty). The compulsion to succeed is taken for granted, and the great mishap absolves the migrant from responsibility for leaving. The starting point of the stories is the early achievements of the person. This initial situation establishes the self-worth of the subject and lays out that migrations did not have to occur. Then the great mishap actuates a transition; it creates a *lack* (in the sense of Vladimir Propp's morphology of the tale). The protagonist responds to it with will and determination (the way I saw people time after time respond to life threatening troubles in the villages of Burkina Faso). The response in this case is not supernatural remedy but the migration decision, which lurches the story forward into a new cycle. International migration bridges the *lack*. The rest of the narrative becomes a rags-to-riches story (or as Aliou more tentatively renders it, 'the last phase of plan'). This successful conclusion confirms the initial premise of self-worth and validates the wisdom of choosing migration.

I think 'the great mishap' corresponds to a moral impasse in which many African migrants find themselves. It becomes more acute when they feel they have come close to the level of success they desired. They feel contrition and they react by denying their agency. Did they do the migrating of their own volition? Did they deliberately leave behind relatives, friends and fellow countrymen? No and no! They were forced to it. Thinking of the migration decision as forced and not freely chosen relieves the responsibility. The whole dilemma, compulsion versus free choice, exercises the migrant's mind. Many adult

migrants make the decision to migrate independently; it is often a personal choice made apart from family and community.

The broader community was not much in evidence in Aliou and Ignatius' stories about how they left for migration. When they chose to migrate they were in full possession of their powers and few people could have told them what to do. Did Aliou's mother, sister or aunt resent his leaving for such a distant place? What did Ignatius's close relatives or offspring think about his going to Istanbul and not coming back? The stories they told me did not elaborate on these matters. The contrasting relationship the two men have to family and community come into view only later. Ignatius, after spending many years in Istanbul building his business, remained a skilful master of kinship and countrymen connections. He was able to build a network on these connections and use it as a resource, capitalising on its possibilities (by bringing young men from Igbo country as employees) and giving his enterprise a transnational dimension (by planning to make his son a manager and successor). Both of these practices are common among migrants of Igbo origin who have their own businesses in Istanbul. Aliou had greater difficulties managing and mobilising such links. His attempts seem only to have ruined him. Maybe what explains this difference is that Aliou was dealing with social equals, while Ignatius's network expanded on the basis of pre-existing links of hierarchy (poorer fellow villagers, sons).

The larger observation is that both Aliou and Ignatius kept strong commitment to their birthplace, as did the majority of Central and West African migrants with whom I had extended conversations. They saw their migration as nothing other than temporary. This was revealed in two ways. First, their measures of success and failure derived from their home social matrices. They were also sensitive to valuations made in their home communities but indifferent to those made outside of it, which explains how the migrants put up with deprivation and loss of dignity in Istanbul, without losing self-respect.⁸

Second, in the migrant's eyes, the final achievement of the migration experience always involves a triumphant return to the community of birth. The two protagonists project a return to their native land where they will assume the part of elder men of grand social standing. Aliou had his 'plan' with the two stores and the car, Ignatius his prospect of returning to southern Nigeria as the manager of a transnational concern, once the Istanbul workplace was safely delegated to his son. Both life projects were wedded to their community of origin. The same attitude accounted for the migrants' views on marriage to non-African women in Istanbul and the children born in these marriages (Şaul 2004: 192–3).

The migrants' troubled conscience when they reflected on the years they had spent away from relatives, friends and their home communities was another indication that they remained immersed in the web of social relations and representations of their early lives. They felt compelled to account for the move as something imposed on them, a calamity they were subjected to as passive recipients, and to dismiss that it may have been their own choice, that they may have betrayed those around them. There were other signals of the same urge – the remittances they sent to relatives, the visits back home (which Aliou could not do because of his irregular visa situation), and the employment opportunities they provided to younger relatives. But these expedients could not fully offset, it seems, the need they felt to explain the initial leap of departure as an action forced on them.

This does not mean that the commitment to the place of birth and its sociocultural parameters can never change nor that it will remain intact in the course of all lives. Migration takes people to different human environments and circumstances and some lives end up taking a shape quite unlike what had been anticipated. Yet several years after leaving home and with some seemingly successful adaptations, for many African migrants in Istanbul communities of birth were still powerfully present.

NOTES

1. The cases involving decision making by the household concerned young migrants. Two boys who had recently finished high school were sent by their fathers to Europe to join relatives who were already established as migrants. Their compatriots in Istanbul had agreed in advance to receive and shelter them, and to find the contacts needed for the next leg of their trip. Likewise, some single young women, high school or college graduates from Edo State in southern Nigeria, were on a migration journey that had been planned by their families. This is a type of migration contrasting with the prevalent pattern of migration from Nigeria to Turkey, which is dominated by the Igbo. In one instance I learned by chance more about the arrangements. The family in Nigeria was indebted to the organisers to pay for the visas, airfare and passers' fees. The deal was that the woman would reimburse this sum from her earnings after she had reached her destination. Other Nigerian men attributed these single women's movement to the cultural dispositions of some people in Edo State and explained that their families expected them to eventually help bring their younger brothers and sisters to Europe, too. These cases came closest to what is described as 'transit migration' in the literature on migration to Western Europe.

2. In migration studies the question has been raised before and forcefully by De Haas & Fokkema (2010). Also in 2010 the journal *African and Black Diaspora* (3, 1) had a special issue on 'family dynamics in transnational migration to Europe', including a contribution by Rosander (2010), which compared three migrant Senegalese women in Tenerife, Spain; one living with her husband, another who had a husband in Senegal, and a third unmarried. I briefly discuss the intra-household approach in anthropology and its intellectual sources in Şaul (2012: 519–20). Somé (2013) has recently published an empirical study guided by these ideas in rural Burkina Faso where farmers try to balance food production for self-provisioning and cotton production for sale.

3. A singular case I encountered was that of a Senegalese man who had two wives. One of the wives lived reportedly in Portugal as a long-term migrant, while the other wife was in Istanbul, where I met

her and she introduced me to her husband too. The man visited both wives in turns. The Istanbul wife was a working 'pendulum' migrant; she came to stay for the summer months, but lived in Dakar during the cold winter months of Istanbul. In 2011 she had done this for three years in a row. She brought herself from Senegal the craft items that she retailed, which was an uncommon situation for the African migrants in the city, and she took her stall out onto the squares and streets of the busy Aksaray district after working hours. She was confident, acting like the owner of her own business. I presume that the three spouses did not share a common household budget, as co-wives never do, but I did not learn the 'intra-household' arrangement they must have worked out.

4. For the information summarised in this paragraph and further references see Harte (2012), Shinn (2015), and Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2016).

5. St Anthony church also made its basement level sanctuary available to African migrants of the Ethiopian Eastern Orthodox congregation for their mass.

6. The situation is different now. First, Cihangir was gentrified through private investment and cleared of its migrant and national squatter populations. During my fieldwork, Tarlabası was on a similar course with an urban renewal project underway, planned by the municipal government, and contested by its residents and some other civic groups. Few Africans remained there. Since then, Taksim Square has also been radically reconfigured, with underground motorways that may make it less appealing as a social space where large numbers, including migrants, gather. (After the July 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey, Taksim Square witnessed immense rallies backing the president for several weeks, thus recovering in part its historic function as setting for massive political demonstrations, but this time in support of government and under its watch, not in protest against it.)

7. Rossi (2014) makes a related point with regard to a migrant from Niger, who goes to work in Central Africa. Non-capitalist and capitalist worlds get articulated in the migrant's peregrinations, but on the migrant's own terms, that is the capitalist elements get grafted onto the non-capitalist tissue, not the other way around.

8. Similarly, the Senegalese in Brazzaville told Whitehouse that in exile they were ready to do jobs that they would never do in their home communities (Whitehouse 2012: 84–90).

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