



COMMODITY PRODUCTION AND AFRICAN MIGRATION TO TURKEY, NOW AND IN THE PREMODERN PAST

Produção de commodities e migração africana para a Turquia, agora e no passado moderno

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MIGRAÇÃO LABORAL E PRODUÇÃO DE COMMODITIES NA ÁFRICA: CONEXÕES GLOBAIS

LABOR MIGRATION AND COMMODITY PRODUCTION IN AFRICA: GLOBAL ENTANGLEMENTS

ABSTRACT

African Migration in Turkey is an under-researched area despite the long history of migration between West Africa and the Ottoman Empire and the large number of African migrants in Turkey. The connection of this historical and contemporary migration movement with commodity production reveals not only the basic dynamics and patterns but also the global character of this mobility. While the flow of labor and commodities between Africa and Turkey continues, especially with Turkey's new Africa policy after 2002, African migrants are also implementing their own interests and agendas. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach encompassing history, economics, and anthropology reveals intertwined transformations and networks that provide a perspective for historical changes.

KEYWORDS

West African migration. Turkey. Turkish African Policy.

RESUMO

A migração africana na Turquia é uma área pouco pesquisada, apesar da longa história de migração entre a África Ocidental e o Império Otomano e do grande número de migrantes africanos na Turquia. A conexão entre esse movimento migratório histórico e contemporâneo e a produção de commodities revela não apenas as dinâmicas e padrões básicos, mas também o caráter global dessa mobilidade. Enquanto o fluxo de trabalho e commodities entre a África e a Turquia continua, especialmente com o surgimento de uma nova política africana da Turquia após 2002, os migrantes africanos também estão implementando seus próprios interesses e agendas. Assim, uma abordagem interdisciplinar que abrange história, economia e antropologia revela transformações e redes entrelaçadas que nos fornecem uma perspectiva para as mudanças históricas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES

Migração ocidental-africana. Turquia.



This paper has a double focus with discontinuity in time, discussions of two different phases of mobility from sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean or more specifically to the north and eastern parts of it that is now Turkey. The common thread that recommends joining these observations together is *commodity*, its production and also all that is involved in its exchange. The early phase is the trans-Saharan trade, conducted in premodern conditions although in the nineteenth century the commodities involved in the import leg of it were industrial. This trade, starting in what is now northern Nigeria went through the desert, then the large towns lying on the northern edge of the Sahara, and reached the port cities of North Africa on the Mediterranean. From there on, a trip overseas of equal length (but involving considerably less hardship) brought the goods and the human subjects to the northern shore and the cities of the Ottoman realm. The tragic component of this phase is that the "commodities" included some of the subjects of the mobility, captured persons who under compulsion were taken to places where they were transacted as slaves. Slavery does not exhaust the discussion of this trade, of commodity and mobility, however, and we want to present the wider commercial context. The second phase in this article concerns a period that begins in the 1990s, when sub-Saharan Africans started migrating, with plans and designs in their head and hope in their heart, to the same shores. This part is written on the basis of several decades of anthropological research following ethnographic and archival methods in West Africa and, since 2010, qualitative research on African mobility to Turkey. The sub-Saharan migrants, when they are successful, become the traders and agents of the transactions. They were, and continue to be, the masters of the movement of goods, of money and human mobility.¹

MOBILITY AND TRADING DURING THE 18th AND 19th CENTURIES AND THE DAWN OF COLONIALISM

The 18th century witnessed the flourishing of the trans-Saharan trade, providing European economies with ivory and ostrich feathers, and the Ottoman territories with gold and enslaved individuals (Newbury, 1966; Jonson, 1976). While the origin of the gold was the zones of production close to the Atlantic coast and the trade networks converging on Timbuktu, enslaved people were conveyed from the Hausaland and southern Bornu. Thus, Tripolitania held a unique position for the Ottoman Empire in procuring enslaved individuals, who were eventually put to work in Izmir (as farm workers) and in Istanbul (as domestic servants) (Hilal, 1999, p. 141).² The city of Murzuq played a key role in this slave trade. For three hundred years, from 1250 to 1550, it had been ruled by the Kanem-Bornu political center and thus it was heavily influenced by Kanuri culture and language (Al-Dhikel, 2022, p. 188-189). This resulted in the historical oddity of the enslaved individuals from Hausaland being collectively called *Afnu* in Tripolitania and in the central Ottoman Empire (*Afnu* is the Kanuri ethnonym for Hausa). The reason was that this human chattel was registered in the court of Tripoli under this Kanuri term (D.M.T.L., p. 15/6). When they arrived in Istanbul or Izmir, the captives were once again officially recorded as *Afnu* and from then on referred to as such in the society. More generally, next to Hausa, the Kanuri language was powerfully present in the African society that came into existence and thrived in the central regions of

¹ The perspective that influences this account of modern sub-Saharan migration was explained, among other places, in Şaul and Pelican (2014).

² Izmir played a particularly significant part in the slave trade, receiving the largest number of enslaved individuals compared to other cities such as Istanbul, Alexandria, and Cairo. This resulted in the development of a distinct black folk culture in the city. See: Güneş, 1999; Şaul, 2015.

the Ottoman Empire (frequently, the Hausa language was called *Afnuca* and the Kanuri language *Bornoca* – see Şaul, 2015).

The interaction between Ottoman society and the interior regions of West Africa was not exclusively, or even primarily, based on the practice of slavery. Many Muslim rulers of the Sahara and the Sahel regions recognized the Ottoman sultan as their caliph and accorded the Ottomans religious prestige. A notable example was the sultanate of Agadez, where dynastic authority is wielded by a family known as *Istanbulawa*, which in Hausa means 'person from Istanbul'. This name is linked to a founding myth: in the beginning of the Agadez sultanate, in the 1400s, Tuareg communities had a quarrel during the selection of the sultan. They sent an envoy to Istanbul asking the Ottoman sultan to provide one of his sons as their ruler. The sultan is supposed to have sent a son, named Yusuf, who became the first ruler of Agadez (Hamani, 2006, p. 133-135). Istanbul also served as a significant economic and political center for the Kel Azgher Tuareg community in Ghat. They maintained a representative in Istanbul to provide regular updates on political and economic developments, which facilitated operations in the trans-Saharan trade network for the efficient management of their commercial activities (Çölgeçen, 2014, p. 414). Furthermore, as slavery in the Ottoman realm was restricted not by race but by religious affiliation, many Muslim Kanuri merchants engaged in commerce in Murzuq, in Tripoli, and in Istanbul, and some of these actually participated in slavery as traders (D.M.T.L., 1842).³ Muslim sub-Saharan merchants, agents, and scholars visited Istanbul and Izmir regularly to pursue economic, political, and intellectual ends, yet it remains true that the majority of the sub-Saharan African population that lived in the heartland of the Ottoman Empire consisted of individuals of "non-Muslim" origin who had been brought as human chattel.

During the latter half of the 19th century the Ottoman administration's interactions with the Sahara societies entered a new phase. In the 1850s, the leaders of Ghat, Kawar, and Tibesti sought Ottoman suzerainty over their territories, and when this request was granted, they assumed the position of Ottoman governors.⁴ This was the first time that the central Sahara region fell nominally under Ottoman rule. The Ottoman presence in this area persisted until the French invasion of the Sahara in 1903 and from 1850 to 1900 the Ottomans paid special attention to it. Abdulmejid I's 1857 treaty with London for the suppression of the Mediterranean slave trade prompted the merchants of Tripolitania to shift their focus on the sale of tanned skins, ivory, and ostrich feathers (Düstur, p. 368). As the volume of the slave trade in the Mediterranean was much lower than that of Atlantic slave trade, the suppression did not significantly impact overall commerce, and in fact its volume increased in the 1870s. It only collapsed after colonial invasion by France, Great Britain, and Italy (Tayseer, 1988, p. 158). The final years of Ottoman presence in the Sahara (1890s-1910s) form a notable period in West African history characterized by strategies of local agents to procure Ottoman support to resist European colonial invasions. For instance, in 1886 the sultans of Agadez and Zinder and the caliph of Sokoto sent a commission to propose a political and military alliance with the Ottoman government (B.O.A., 35/88). In 1896, the sultan of Wadai planned an Islamic federation of West Africa under the rule of the Ottoman Sultan (B.O.A., 122/121). In the 1900s discussions were held between Ottoman officers and the Sanussiyya leaders to establish an African state in the central Sahara under the rule of the Sanusiyyas and the protection of the Ottoman Empire (Al-Dajjani, 1967, p.

³ The main difference from transatlantic slavery was that the grounds for enslavement in the Ottoman domain was not skin color but "not being a Muslim", and the majority of the enslaved in the Ottoman Empire were not sub-Saharan Africans but people from Eastern or Central Europe. The integration of enslaved East European in the Ottoman army and in some cases the bureaucracy was one of the oldest traditions, as the name "devşirme" indicates. See: *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, v. 9, p. 254-257.

⁴ Ghat came under Ottoman rule in 1854, see: B.O.A., İrade Dahiliye, 915. Kawar and Tibesti accepted Ottoman rule in 1849, see: B.O.A., İrade Dahiliye, 15368.

229). Although the rapid expansion of European invasions thwarted these plans, during the colonial period local rulers continued to anticipate military intervention from the Ottomans for their protection. This left a legacy of Ottomans in West Africa as allies against colonial invasion and rule.

NEW COMMODITIES AND NEW MOBILITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Much of this legacy had been erased from memory when modern African migration to Turkey started in the 1990s.⁵ The pioneers of the new mobility were a small number of graduate students who enrolled in doctoral programs in Turkish universities. Soon afterwards graduate student scholarships became available from Turkish government sources, adding to the networks that got going a continuing movement of student and non-student migration. In the twenty-first century, this initially meagre flow quickly grew into a more powerful and diversified current of migration. The connection to international trade, banking, and ultimately commodity production was present from the very beginning, but as time went by it became more pronounced and noticeable. Sub-Saharan African migration took a new turn and was amplified when a connection was established between the consumer goods demand of the African economies and the modest-sized but diverse manufacturing enterprises operating in Turkey. This part of the story needs some explanation because although it is not substantially different from other accounts of world migration, it seems unusual when compared to widespread narratives stressing poverty or compulsion as triggers for international migration or refugee studies perspectives that are influential in the research produced by western European institutions.

It would be beneficial to begin by examining the social context and the situation of African countries since the late 20th century, with a new perspective aimed at comprehending African migration beyond the continent. When African countries became independent, the earlier pattern of migration was for the former subjects to travel to the old colonial metropole. Generally, they meant to eventually return to their home country. Students intended to return after they received their diploma (and had indulged themselves a little bit) whereas for workers sending remittances to family members was often equally important, but they planned to return "home" when they possessed some savings. Linguistic boundaries were important and redirecting from Belgium to France was not quite a deviation. This pattern continues, but primarily for students seeking advanced degrees or for professionals. For common people who wish to take advantage of international migration, possible destinations for making a better income present a more diverse list. Important also to understand is that for sub-Saharan international migrants who want to achieve a better life, salaried work is not ideal. It is accepted reluctantly, for lack of something better. Different ways of achieving income, such as trading, self-employment, the provision of services independently, exporting goods at a small scale to the home country, or a combination of these activities are preferable.

Exporting goods from countries with more diversified and developed manufacturing sectors to sub-Saharan African countries is a key aspect of modern international migration. This link connects human movement with changes in global supply chains and the characteristics of activities in manufacturing hubs worldwide.

The demand for imported manufactured goods in sub-Saharan countries increased due to rising incomes in many of these nations, highlighting the urban sectors' inability to

⁵ The memory of past African migrations to Turkey and a sense of its relevance for contemporary migrant mobility has since then it has been regained, with the rise of an Afro-Turk movement among Turkish people of African descent.

meet this demand. Despite stereotypes, most sub-Saharan economies are performing well. While they may not be undergoing radical transformations, diversifying or upgrading their technology, as development experts would like, they have achieved reasonable growth rates and seen improvements in per capita incomes over the past few decades. This was especially true in the present century up to 2014 (Acet, 2023) and in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Leke *et al.*, 2010), which is the time period when the outmigration and small-scale import trade pattern discussed in this article came into existence.⁶ Growing family incomes resulted in some demand for consumer goods, building materials for home improvement, or motorized vehicle parts, which were imported. An important demand area was ready-made clothing, in modern styles but catering to various consumer types: different age groups and body builds; men and women; formal, highly stylish, or everyday wear, including replicas of international brands; and baby clothing. There was also a need for home and kitchen goods, tiles, kitchen and bathroom furnishings, medicines, machine and car parts, and furniture like sofas and easy chairs.

In the 1990s, numerous traders from West Africa journeyed to various regions globally in search of suppliers to meet local consumer demand with a favorable quality/price balance. The places where they could source such items were not in the former colonial metropolises. European industry could not meet the demands of these small traders who sought to supply manufactured goods in small quantities, due to the limited income base and the competitive, small-scale nature of the emerging foreign trade in sub-Saharan countries. A variety of actors engaged in trading volumes ranging from mid-sized to small-scale. Major Malian male merchants and Senegalese or East African female merchants could travel every other week or once a month, carrying tens of thousands of dollars for their business transactions, often in cash (more recently, the options in this regard have expanded). Dozens and later hundreds of shipping companies emerged to support these export activities, offering a full range of essential services. This included handling customs paperwork, obtaining export licenses, storage, packing bales, transferring to port facilities, and shipping goods by air or sea freight (the cargo or *kargo* stores that figure prominently in the accounts). At the opposite end of the spectrum, hundreds of female traders participate in infrequent journeys, known as "suitcase trade." They receive special offers from certain airlines that value this customer base. The committed trader-passenger in the suitcase trade may transport a significant number of packages as excess baggage, often weighing hundreds of pounds.

At the turn of the century Dubai was the most popular trade destination in Senegal and the other Francophone countries of West Africa. The city was not yet fully the luxury tourism paradise it is today, but it was already a vital regional and international trade hub and a global passenger transition center. African merchants could stay in hotels mainly for trade visitors like themselves. Here, they met fellow compatriots or other African migrants who spoke French or their native language, serving as guides and interpreters during shopping trips. Additionally, there were money bureaus for exchanging CFA francs or other African currencies with ease. At the beginning of my research all of this sounded fabulous, but with hindsight I see clearly that a model for a service infrastructure catering to the needs of small-scale export traders had emerged somewhere, was flourishing in Dubai, and in time it became established in other cities such as Istanbul. Dubai served mostly as an entrepot. Its wholesale firms serving the African traders were display stores and warehouses for merchandise imported from Far Eastern manufacturing centers. What needs to be

⁶ See also for example: AFDB. Africa's economic growth to outpace global forecast in 2023=2024 - African Development Bank biannual report. <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/africas-economic-growth-outpace-global-forecast-2023-2024-african-development-bank-biannual-report-58293>; AFDB. Africa dominates list of the world's 20 fastest-growing economies in 2024 <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/africa-dominates-list-worlds-20-fastest-growing-economies-2024-african-development-bank-says-macroeconomic-report-68751>

highlighted is the complementary relationship and synergy between African migrants who establish themselves in global trade hubs like Dubai, offering essential services to international visitors, and the transient merchants and traders who visit briefly for sourcing trips.

Until 2010, travelers from Dakar, Bamako, and other major cities in West Africa were venturing not only to Dubai but also to manufacturing hubs in the Far East such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Guangzhou. Some daring individuals, due to their social status, were exploring destinations like Indian cities or European capitals. It was during this time that Istanbul emerged as a potential source for various consumer goods. Initially, baby clothing, glass tableware, plastic containers, and kitchen items were among the first imports I noted from Istanbul. In 2010, I observed that the merchants I encountered in Bamako were welcoming, generous, and keen on maintaining connections upon learning about my ties to the USA and Turkey.

The trade connection established by merchant visitors in Turkey coincided with undocumented work migrations and the increasing number of African students in Turkish universities. Most migrants arrived with short-term visas, utilizing regular commercial flights. Traders and migrants often acquired short-term visas through intermediaries, wholesale store owners, and cargo office proprietors, who provided business trip invitation letters, even to unfamiliar individuals. These letters, received in Africa, were then submitted by applicants to the Turkish consulate for visa processing. Some visitors who transitioned to migrants later became irregular due to overstaying their visas. Depending on evolving Turkish policies, a portion of these migrants could apply for and secure residence permits before their initial visas expired. If granted, the residence permit shifted their status to partially regular (obtaining a work permit was rare and exceptional).

The rise of work migration from sub-Saharan Africa in Turkey can be reconstructed through interviews and personal accounts, although the absence of official documents makes precise tracking of the development difficult. Discrepancies between the entry and exit numbers at border checkpoints offer a crude measure of the increasing presence of irregular migrants opting to overstay their visas.⁷ Beyond official documentation, during the 2010s, numerous Africans illicitly entered Turkey via its southern border with Syria. They were predominantly East Africans, and they traveled through Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon, often having worked as migrants in these countries. However, with the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, this route closed. The distance from the Syrian border to Istanbul, where African migrants seek employment and shelter, spans approximately 1200 km—a challenging 13-hour drive without breaks. For those who illegally crossed the border, the journey was considerably longer and fraught with danger. While the exact proportion of African migrants entering Turkey this way remains unclear, it appears to have been relatively minor.⁸

Sub-Saharan African migrants in Istanbul often find employment in daily jobs, particularly in workshops within the metropolitan area that produce various goods. During the 2010s, the Kumkapı-Laleli-Aksaray area emerged as a significant work and living hub for them. For instance, a number of individuals I spoke with were employed in Gedikpaşa workshops specializing in handbag manufacturing and the production of shoes, including sports, men's, women's, baby shoes, sandals, slippers, and imitation brands. Others worked

⁷ For these statistics, please refer to my project's website at <https://afirmig2tr.com/tr/kaynaklar/ytb-burs-istatistikleri/>.

⁸ One also meets African migrants who mention beginning their journey by obtaining a visa to Iran, where they traveled before illegally entering Turkey by crossing the land border in the east between Iran and Turkey. This route, characterized by mountainous terrain and a challenging walk, including a strenuous climb, is more commonly used by migrants coming from Afghanistan or Pakistan, located to the east of Iran. While the figures for sub-Saharan migrants taking this route may be limited, this data highlights the surprisingly indirect paths some migrants take.

in recycling centers, as porters, in construction, or at car washes. Despite having diverse professional backgrounds and relatively good education levels, they are willing to undertake any type of manual labor.⁹ A notable portion of Nigerians had college degrees. Similarly, many Francophone migrants had started college but not finished or had finished high school. While seeking work in daily or weekly wage jobs, they aspired to move into independent roles like vendors, commission agents, or self-employed traders. Most sub-Saharan migrants work in the clothing sector. Despite being a minority, young women among West African migrants could find jobs in ready-made clothing stores selling women's apparel and work as salespeople/interpreters, displaying different styles to potential customers. With some luck and ingenuity, men were able to transition from wage work to becoming guides and sales agents in stores or small cargo freight offices. They earned money by charging fees to African tradespeople and receiving commissions from wholesale vendors. Some also maintained a network of customers among store owners in African cities, serving as agents for goods consignments between sourcing trips. This was seen as the pinnacle of success for migrants in Turkey, achieved after years of toiling in low-paying jobs, learning Turkish, and becoming familiar with markets catering to small-scale merchants from Africa and other countries.

Some of the newly arrived migrants attempted to skip the wage work phase and move directly to self-employed retail sales in the city. Senegalese migrants perform as itinerant urban vendors not only in Istanbul but also in other migrant destinations, as revealed by a growing body of literature on Senegalese migration to western European and northern American cities. Belonging to the Muridiyya brotherhood helps a migrant by placing them within networks of solidarity from the outset. Senegalese migrants specialize in selling wristwatches and cologne, setting up makeshift stalls on the bustling sidewalks of city streets and squares. Many Istanbul residents first encountered African migrants through these vendors, associating sub-Saharan migration primarily with this occupation. However, in reality, self-employed individuals make up only a small fraction of African migration to Turkey, with street vendors constituting an even smaller proportion.

Migrants from various countries often arrive at their destination with some savings, hoping to start an independent money-making venture right away. However, they often underestimate the challenges of adapting to local conditions and learning the Turkish language, and they are unprepared for the level of social rejection they may encounter. Their savings are quickly depleted as they fall victim to scams and exploitation, even from more experienced fellow migrants. The watch and cologne business of the Senegalese, however, requires only a small initial investment to set up a well-stocked display stand. Established migrants guide newcomers in finding vending locations and navigating the city using public transportation. The success of sidewalk hawking depends on the tolerance of municipal authorities. Over the years, the places and hours available to migrants for work as independent vendors have significantly decreased. Senegalese migrants now also find employment in the periodic neighborhood markets, which meet on different days of the week or in different locations for merchandise sales (as in flea markets) or for fresh produce. You can meet them both as stand owners who pay a daily license fee or as employees working for Turkish operators with more capital. This kind of work allows them to have free days to engage in trade on their own or guide visiting African merchants.

Street vending is not something all sub-Saharan migrants like to do. For example, Nigerian migrants (mostly people originating in the southwest and of Igbo origin) do not do it, even if they find themselves unemployed. Many Nigerian migrants arrive in Turkey with more substantial funds. Those among them who can start small export businesses

⁹ For the range of income-generating activities of Sub-Saharan migrants in Istanbul, Şaul (2014).

sometimes bring in poorer compatriots or relatives who work for a period for them as dependents. We also find contractual agreements or partnerships in businesses such as hairdressers, restaurants, or bars that serve the migrant community. One observation is that these work connections among the migrants are often established as partnerships or as the sharing of proceeds, or depend on the payment of a commission per transaction. The Nigerians also have also a reputation for including individuals who take the risk of engaging in underworld transactions to achieve higher incomes, although the risks they are taking are very high.

The perspective of almost all migrants I interacted with is to make savings which they could later use as capital to return to the home country and establish a business. I wrote about a migrant who went about this as a determined "plan" executed with great discipline and another who was able to establish a large enterprise in an occupation that he had learned in his migrant work experience (two instances of successful accomplishment). Others were able to pass to Western Europe as irregulars after having spent years in Turkey, and once in the Western Europe apply for and receive refugee status, but continue to engage in export trade from Turkey by keeping active the connections that they had established when they lived there. The goal of achieving the savings to establish at the home country a business that would bring prosperity, and the very thought of the prestige of returning from migration with this kind of achievement was what justified the great sacrifices made for the migration trip and the privations endured along the way.

The discovery of Turkey as a migration destination for sub-Saharan Africans happened in a relatively short period in the 1990s as the result of multiple coinciding factors. One was the migration to the old metropolises and other countries of Western Europe. In the last decades of the twentieth century political asylum had become an imaginable way to realize the objective of migration, and the migrants were learning how to handle the refugee system. One interesting source of early migration to Istanbul derived, for example, from the stream of migration that had been established between Burkina Faso to northern Italy -which had started in the 1970s in an incidental manner with the developmental aid programs of Italy (IOM, 2016). Burkinabe migrants who came to Istanbul as a way of joining acquaintances or relatives in Italy discovered that they could find opportunities for work and business in this city and altered their original plans. Among my interlocutors they were among the earliest migrants from West Africa in Istanbul. Many others aimed to go to Germany which had a reputation for generous payments to asylum seekers.

Another element in the discovery of Turkey was the growing visibility of the country in the current affairs of the world. One unexpected domain – for me, when I started my research – was professional football. Several Senegalese interlocutors mentioned the FIFA World Cup of 2002. In that competition, the Senegalese national team had a legendary performance and reached the quarter finals, after defeating France (the colonial metropole, the glory!) and two-time champions Uruguay. Then they were eliminated with a loss to the Turkish team. Ten years later Senegalese migrants in Istanbul vividly remembered these games and said that they thought Turkey was an important player in the world and started "conducting research" on the country as a possible emigration destination. In addition, there was the international soccer stars market, where some famous African players were contracted by major Turkish teams with fabulous salaries, the news making the headlines in the African newspapers. These reports fed a flow of sports aspirants coming to Turkey with great hopes, and invariably getting frustrated to discover that without a contract from the start as an international player, and especially in the position of an irregular migrant already in the country, it was impossible to find a spot in one of teams in the professional leagues.

The broader framework that stimulated sub-Saharan migration to Turkey was the groundbreaking political and diplomatic initiatives of Turkey to reposition itself in the wider

world vis-a-vis non-western countries. This reorientation started with the first neoliberal civilian government of the 1980s and gained strength in the 21st century. In 1998 the "Opening to Africa" program of the Foreign Ministry served as a clarion call. Since 2002 Justice and Development Party (AKP) ruled the country and its successive governments used every channel of diplomacy, trade, investment, education, health, security, and military cooperation along with soft power tools like culture and history to pursue connections with African countries. 2005 was declared as the Year of Africa and in that year African Union (AU) granted Turkey observer status in its general assembly. In subsequent years mutual visits took place at the levels of head of state and below. Three Africa-Turkey summits were organized under AU patronage: Istanbul in 2008, Malabo, Equatorial Guinea in 2014, and Ankara in 2021. Turkey now has an embassy in 43 African countries, an office of the developmental aid agency TIKA in 22 countries, 175 Turkish private schools sponsored by the Minister of Education in 26 African countries. Turkish Airlines schedules flights to 61 African destinations in 40 countries. The country also has security agreements with some African countries and appoints military attaches to at least 22 of them.

The large number of African students in Turkey is part of this expansion, but because of its special relevance for our topic it is worth expanding upon this development. The first graduate level students arrived in Turkey in the 1990s with scholarships that had been issued by the Islamic Development Bank to support work toward PhD degrees in technical domains. The Turkish government programs emulated the international initiatives and broadened them. Then private foundations established by religious movements, which were favored by the government, started giving out scholarships and thus provided mobility to an even greater number of African (and other foreign) students. They went about this task in unaccustomed ways, by including not only university students but designing programs targeting high school students and religious training as well.

The main government scholarship program is administered by a special office [*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*] and grants scholarships for undergraduate, masters' and doctoral students under the label YTB (*Türkiye* Scholarships). Between 2012-2021 this office granted a total of slightly under 10,000 multi-year scholarships to sub-Saharan university students of all levels (renewable for up to five years if the student doesn't leave the program); at any one year more than 15,000 sub-Saharan students were on these scholarships.¹⁰ In addition, there were tens of thousands more, fed by the private Turkish schools established in the different African countries (originally by the Gülen religious movement which was originally part of the Islamist coalition but ran afoul of the AKP party and government in the 2010s). They were brought with the fellowships of the Foundation of the Office of Religious Affairs (Diyanet Vakfı) and the private foundations of religious *tariqa* formations (such as the Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi order that has its Istanbul headquarters in the Üsküdar district) which proliferated and prospered, especially after the Gülen movement's fall from grace.

Eventually the number of students expanded way beyond the scholarship opportunities. Now the majority of students from sub-Saharan countries studying in Turkish universities are financed by their families. Another unexpected development is that these families are not necessarily in Africa, sometimes they are migrants who received in refugee status in Western European countries.

The sub-Saharan university students I encountered in Istanbul in the course of my research (dozens of interviews and acquaintanceships or friendships in 13 years) invariably

¹⁰ The data on the number of scholarships statistics are not published, but are occasionally revealed in aggregate form in official declarations or periodical press releases. Some data are made available to researchers by special arrangement. The scholarships granted to sub-Saharan countries yearly and by country are listed for the decade in my project's website <https://afirmig2tr.com/tr/kaynaklar/ytb-burs-istatistikleri/>

want to participate in international trade in their student years, in order to increase their modest income but also as apprenticeship and entry into it as a profession later on, after they graduate.¹¹ With some guidance many of them are able to start, by visiting the wholesale store neighborhoods, meeting store owners and other people engaged in the same activity. If they study in universities outside of Istanbul, they travel to Istanbul in their vacation periods either serving as guides to visiting African trades people or by supplying a business partner or acquaintance in Africa. As already mentioned, the new communication technologies and quick international money transfer services such as Western Union and MoneyGram allow to conduct this kind of trade at a very small personal scale by developing a social media following and posting consumer items photographs and taking individual orders which are filled by mail. At a larger scale, then famous cargo companies enter the circuit.

The situation in Istanbul with regards to both work migrants who arrive in Turkey with varying degrees of savings and human capital and the students in the universities is similar to what African migrants do in other migration destinations in the world. I find the comparison especially compelling with the circumstances of sub-Saharan migrants in non-European or North American countries. Sub-Saharan migration to China and its connection to manufacturing, supply chains and international commerce is best documented in the literature (Bertoncello; Bredeloup, 2007, 2009; Bodomo, 2018, 2010; Braun, 2019; Le Bail; H el ene, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2008; Li *et al.*, 2012; Lyons; Brown; Li, 2008, 2012). A study of university students as entrepreneurs also exists (Bredeloup, 2014).

The nature of Turkish manufacturing activity created the opportunities for this migration. A dynamic and diversified production activity emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century as thousands of small-scale firms energetically pursued export outlets. The medium to small-size scale of these enterprises made them suitable for the personal enterprises of sub-Saharan traders. The clothing stores can produce styles and models that can be changed frequently, adapt to different body sizes and builds and consumer preferences. Machine shops can produce specialized equipment on demand. I know of an educated sub-Saharan migrant who worked for a woman entrepreneur producing pasta for packaging and sale with equipment that she could fit in her large home kitchen, and he did this to learn the ropes of the business – one of many skills he was able to acquire during the years he spent in Istanbul before relocating to Germany as an asylum seeker. One can find metal shops that can produce five tires (one for a spare) of particular car model and year and African traders pass this kind of order for a particular customer. This sort of production capacity, diversity, at this modest scale is not to be found in many other places and resulted in a fit with the needs for international migrant work and consumer market demand in sub-Saharan countries.

To compare this activity with the earlier premodern mobility of sub-Saharan Africans which included the compulsory (slave trade) component, the contrast is not only that commodity production in the past involved less manufacturing and incomparably more limited transportation and financing resources, but also that the goods flowed in the opposite direction. The northern shore of the Mediterranean received not only the human subjects of mobility, free or enslaved, but also the products of commodity production (ostrich feathers, gum Arabic, skins, etc.). In the modern period and for now the commodities flow primarily the other way.

¹¹ The exceptions are perhaps the few advanced researchers in doctoral programs who hopefully will become researcher-instructors after they earn their degree. A Senegalese doctoral student in Ankara University that I met several years ago, however, was writing a thesis on improved varieties of wheat – because it was the field of his advisor who was the only Francophone professor in the department – which seems to be of doubtful utility for Senegal, where wheat doesn't grow.

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