

## Chapter 16

# African Passages through Istanbul

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Although part of the Turkish city Istanbul belongs, geologically speaking, to the European continent, it is located outside the boundaries of the European Union (EU). Because of its proximity to the EU, Istanbul is an important crossroad for (irregular) migrants who hope to reach the EU. Since the early 1990s, the city has received many migrants from the former Soviet Union, the Middle East and East Asia (İçduygu and Toktas 2002; İçduygu and Yüksekler 2008; Akinbingöl 2003; Daniş 2006; Van Liempt 2007). Nowadays, more and more sub-Saharan Africans are moving into this region. While the exact number remains highly uncertain,<sup>1</sup> Istanbul is host to a considerable number of groups of migrants from the Horn of Africa, as well as an increasing number of West and Central Africans, including Nigerians, Sierra Leones, Ghanaians, Congolese and Senegalese. Certainly, not all of these sub-Saharan African migrants are ‘in transit’ in Istanbul trying to make their way into the EU. On the contrary, many Africans hope for a ‘settled life’ in Istanbul. Others are studying at the universities whilst still others are commuting as transnational traders between Turkey and their countries of origin. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that sub-Saharan Africans are increasingly using Istanbul as a gateway to the EU (Brewer and Yüksekler 2006; Ozdil 2008; Schapendonk 2011).

This contribution aims to understand the role and function of Istanbul in the (irregular) migration trajectories of sub-Saharan Africans who are heading for Europe. Having passed the phase of indifference and locational thresholds (Van der Velde and Van Naerssen 2011), these migrants face diverse challenges that hinder their journeys en route. The research findings are based on in-depth interviews with sub-Saharan African migrants in and around Istanbul. The insights are used to discuss the thin line between migrants’ transit statuses and settlement in the city. Moreover, using a longitudinal research approach (Schapendonk 2011), this chapter elaborates on the different ways migration trajectories evolve through the passage of time. It focuses on migrants’ living situations in Istanbul and their changing aspirations in the course of their movements. The empirical insights finally result in a reflection on ‘the trajectory’, mentioned by Van der Velde and Van Naerssen (2011) as a relevant concept in analysing migration and its decision-making processes. First, however, the contemporary dynamics of sub-Saharan African migration are discussed. As African migration towards the North is one of the most stigmatized forms of human mobility of our times (De Haas 2008), some contextualization is much needed to put the volume and direction of such mobility in a proper perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> However, CNN claims that there are ‘tens of thousands’ of Africans living in Istanbul (Watson and Bailey-Hoover 2011). There are also estimates of ‘thousands of Africans’ living in the Kumkapi district alone (*National World*, 5 September 2011). Another indication is the appearance of sub-Saharan Africans in figures on undocumented migration. Between 1995 and 2005, there were 35,000 sub-Saharan Africans apprehended for undocumented migration in Turkey (Brewer and Yüksekler 2006).

## African Passages to/through Turkey: Fragmented Journeys and Transit Solutions

In studies about African migration, it is important to realize that human mobility is very central in the understanding of social life in this part of the world. The diverse mobilities of, among others, migrants, pastoralists, traders, musicians and Koran students challenge the notion that sedentary lifestyles are the norm (see for instance De Bruijn et al. 2001; Hahn and Klute 2007). When it concerns international mobility, African migration is often associated with an 'exodus' to 'the North' suggesting that almost all African migrants aim to leave the African continent (De Haas 2008). This exodus-like image is misleading as the bulk of African international migrants remains in the African continent and Africa's international migration has in fact a strong regional character. In the West African context for example, it is estimated that almost 85 per cent of the international migrants move across borders within the West African region, mainly in the direction of booming economies such as Ivory Coast, Gabon and Nigeria (Gnisci 2008; see also Spaan and Van Moppes 2006; Adepoju 2008). Only a minority leaves for Europe or the United States. In the southern African region, undoubtedly, it is the modern economy of South Africa that is attracting many migrants from neighbouring countries (Crush and McDonald 2000; Nyamnjoh 2006). A similar regional pattern is found in Central Africa where migrations are catalysed by several violent conflicts in the region. It is, however, commonly known that the majority of these refugees remain within the region (Kraler 2005).

Although regional migration in Africa is the dominant pattern, it is important to note that international migratory patterns within Africa are at the same time diversifying (see for instance Adepoju 2000, 2008; Zoomers et al. 2009; Schapendonk 2012). Regional migrations have expanded to more distant destinations. Post-apartheid South Africa, for example, is an important destination for people from all over Africa (Nyamnjoh 2006). Gabon has received an increasing number of migrants from different countries, including Nigeria and Mali (Adepoju 2000). Moreover, Gaddafi's Libya has been an important destination for migrants originating from West and Central Africa (Brachet 2005; Hamood 2006; Bredeloup 2012a). It remains to be seen, however, if this is still the case after the recent regime change.

This diversification of destinations also holds true in the context of African extracontinental movements. Although colonial and linguistic linkages still provide some axial routes to Europe, the popularity of Europe as a destination seems to decrease, partly because of its harsh border policies (Bakewell and Jonsson 2011). African migrants are increasingly heading for non-Western destinations around the world. Some states and cities in the Middle East, like Lebanon and Dubai, are important destinations for migrants and traders from eastern Africa, including Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia (Spaan and Van Moppes 2006; King et al. 2010) but, more surprisingly, also for migrants from West Africa. The latter includes among others Ghanaians (Peil 1995), Nigerians (Falola and Okpeh 2008) and Cameroonians (Pelican and Tatah 2009). Furthermore, with the emerging economic and institutional linkages between Africa and China, migration in the direction of Asia has also increased. Although official numbers are lacking, there are some good indicators supporting this. It is noted for instance, that the southern Chinese metropolis of Guangzhou has seen the number of African migrants increase by a third every year since 2003 (Ellis 2011).<sup>2</sup> Today Guangzhou hosts about 100,000 sub-Saharan Africans,<sup>3</sup> many of whom are, however,

2 For more information on African mobility to China, see the articles in the Dutch newspaper *Volkscrant* of 25 January 2010 and 31 July 2010.

3 It is estimated that the Guangzhou region houses 30,000 Nigerians of whom more than 50 per cent lack proper documentation (Adepoju and Van der Wiel 2010).

undocumented. The fact that the number of student visa for Africans to China has increased by 40 per cent (in the period 2005–06) also supports the argument that China is an upcoming destination for Africans (Politzer 2008). Next to migration to China, there is also some evidence that Africans are moving to other less traditional destinations such as Israel (Furst-Nichols and Jacobsen 2011), Argentina (*Global Post*, 8 June 2009) and Mexico (Wabgou 2012).

In this context of diversification of destinations, Turkey is not only a 'transit country' for sub-Saharan Africans on their way to Europe, it is also the 'end' destination in its own right. It is an emerging economy attracting all kinds of migrants searching for job opportunities in the formal and informal sectors (Ozdil 2008; De Clerck 2013), as well as for trade possibilities (Steen 2012; Schapendonk 2013). Particularly in the context of African migration, it is important to note that the Turkish government has strengthened political and economic relationships with several African countries in the last ten years (Baird 2011; Özkan and Akgün 2010). This has obviously eased population movements between Africa and Turkey. At the same time, statistics on irregular migration in the Turkish-Greek borderlands suggest that irregular border crossings through Turkey are substantial in terms of numbers. Greece has been confronted with several tens of thousands of migrants who have arrived there by boat (for instance 45,000 in 2006 [Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2008]; 37,000 in 2012<sup>4</sup>). These migrants have most likely transited through Turkey (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2008). Moreover, while there have been 6,600 irregular border crossings recorded in the Evros region (the Greek-Turkish land border) for the year 2009, this number went up to 31,000 in 2010 (*Völksskrant*, 19 October 2010). In this sense, the Evros region is dubbed the 'last door' to the EU (Martino 2010). In response, the Greek authorities built a 12.5-kilometre long barbed wire fence along this section of the borderland. Although the Turkey-Greece route still appears to be important in terms of the number of entrants, it is vital to realize that sub-Saharan Africans account for only roughly 10 per cent of the total number of irregular migrants (Papadopoulos et al. 2014).

All in all, two seemingly contrasting realities are going hand in hand with each other: Turkey as an upcoming destination and as a transit country for Africans. This makes the investigation of migrants' trajectories in Istanbul an interesting but also a challenging task.

### *Istanbul as a Migration Hub: Migration Industries and 'Transit' Policies*

Istanbul, which has officially more than 13 million inhabitants, offers an environment of anonymity where migrants intending to move to Europe can easily hide. The city also hosts a large migration industry that facilitates migrants' onward passages to the EU (see for instance Van Liempt 2007; İçduygu and Toktas 2002). This includes illicit and rather costly services such as the creation and distribution of false travel papers and various smuggling practices, but also conventional services such as the numerous money transfer agencies, cybercafes and travel agencies. The combination of services is vitally important for migrants arranging their onward journeys from Istanbul.

Whilst policymakers and the media tend to stress the involvement of large-scale criminal networks of smugglers and traffickers in irregular migration from Africa to Europe, academic research has indicated that many of these so-called transnational networks are in fact rather fragmented and uncoordinated chains of different actors (Brachet 2005; Hamood 2006). İçduygu and Toktas (2002), who have investigated the migration industry in Turkey, also underline the

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4 See the map with main migratory routes into the EU, provided by Frontex: <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/migratory-routes-map> (accessed 13 February 2014).

importance of locally operating actors in the smuggling practices, which counter the notion of coordinated smuggling networks with mafia-like hierarchical structures.

Thus, Istanbul is *the* place – a migration hub – where migrants meet actors specialized in irregular border crossings to the EU (Suter 2012). The most important routes include the northern route through the Edirne region to Bulgaria and Greece respectively and the sea route via the Izmir region from where various Greek islands can be reached.

Migrants' trajectories to and through Istanbul are not only influenced and shaped by the migration industry, it is also determined by national and local policies. As Turkey has been lobbying hard to join the EU, it aims to harmonize its immigration regulations with that of the EU. The Turkish government has developed the National Action Plan that provides guidelines for this harmonization process. In this light, the so-called transit migration has turned into a highly important policy problem that needs to be 'combated'. The European Commission has strongly encouraged Turkey to strengthen its border controls and to align visa policies with that of the EU (Biehl 2009; Suter 2012). This suggests that migrants' passages from Turkey into the EU may have become more difficult in recent years and that their intermediate stopovers in Turkey are prolonged as a result.

The European Commission also demands Turkey to develop sufficient accommodation facilities for asylum seekers. Until now, Turkey is one of the few countries that apply geographical limitation to the Geneva Convention. This implies that the country only grants asylum to those from Europe. Non-European asylum seekers in Turkey are only granted with 'temporary asylum' until a 'durable solution' is found (see Biehl [2009] for a detailed discussion on Turkey's migration and asylum policy).

An important aspect of the asylum policy in Turkey is its 'satellite city' system. Migrants who apply for asylum in Turkey are sent to one of the thirty satellite cities in the country and they can only leave this place occasionally (Frambach 2011). In general, these cities are relatively remote places. In fact, it is telling that Istanbul, where migrant communities are concentrated and where many informal jobs can be found, is not one of the satellite cities. In the satellite cities, most asylum seekers do not have the permission to work and they live socially isolated lives (Biehl 2009). Hence, for economic and social reasons, many migrants prefer to stay in Istanbul as undocumented or irregular migrants than to go through the strict asylum procedures (see also Suter 2012). The combination of granting temporary asylum and the satellite cities regulations has rather encouraged and enhanced migrants' tendency to use Istanbul as a transit point. It is not an appropriate solution to tackling migrants' precarious situations.

The strengthened policies in Turkey regarding migration can be seen as border-control practices that keep migrants from moving onwards to Europe. It does not, however, deter people from moving towards Europe in the first place. It has only increased the psychological and financial costs of moving, as well as the time spent 'in transit'. As we will see below, this has resulted in some migrants experiencing a daily sense of involuntary immobility (Carling 2002), while others find new opportunities in places they had only intended to pass through in the first place. These policy thresholds, in combination with precarious socio-economic conditions and high living costs, can impact on migrants' aspiration and mobility processes profoundly (Schapendonk 2011; Suter 2012; De Clerck 2013).

### *Methodology*

The empirical insights of this study are mainly based on interviews with sub-Saharan Africans and longitudinal engagement with some of the respondents. They were part of a broader research project focusing on African trajectories to Europe (Schapendonk 2011). Between April and May

2008, 27 sub-Saharan African migrants from various countries were interviewed. The majority of them came from West Africa: Nigeria (12 respondents), Senegal (three), Ivory Coast (two), and Cameroon (one). Among those from Central African countries were Congolese (two), Comorian (two), Sudanese (one), Burundian (one) and Rwandan (one). Additionally, two Somalian migrants were interviewed. The age of the respondents ranged from 22 to 45 years old, and only five of them were female.<sup>5</sup> Some had just arrived in the city, others had been living there for some years – the longest being nine years.

Besides these interviews, six respondents were studied over a period of two years. This longitudinal aspect of the research implies that the courses of migrants' trajectories can be traced by means of telephone calls and internet conversations. Through these translocal engagements, it was possible to grasp (un)expected twists and turns of individual migration processes (Schapendonk 2011). Two of the six longitudinal respondents have also been revisited by the researcher in Heraklion (Greece) and Marseille (France), respectively. In these two places, a week-long ethnographic study was carried out. As a follow-up of these research activities, three master students interviewed a total of 60 African migrants in and around Istanbul (Frambach 2011; Bazuin 2011; Steen 2012). Their findings are used as additional information in this chapter.

The next sections of this chapter discuss the empirical findings and are organized as follows: First, the diversity of routes to Istanbul is discussed. Second, the different situations of migrants living in Istanbul are outlined. It is claimed that the so-called transit situations of migrants are not clear-cut (see also Schapendonk 2012). This section also discusses in detail how migrants' aspirations and migration projects change over time. The third section elaborates on the passages from Istanbul to the EU.

## The Diverse Routes to Istanbul

African migrants reach Istanbul in many different ways. At least four different groups can be distinguished. First, there are migrants who move directly to Istanbul without any stopover in any country (see also De Clerck 2013; Suter 2012). While many of these migrants move to the Turkish city with the aim of reaching Europe ultimately, there are also those who intend to stay for a specific period of time in Istanbul without any plan of moving on to the EU (De Clerck 2013). The latter concern, for example, African students who are on scholarship and studying at the universities in the city. The researchers have also met several young African football players who were on probation as players in Turkish football clubs. During their probation, they do their best to obtain a contract with a club. When they fail to do so, however, their situation can become very difficult. As football agents do not usually provide a return flight ticket, many migrants become stuck in Turkey and end up in a vulnerable socio-economic position. Consequently, moving to Europe as an undocumented migrant becomes an alternative. Finally, as noted previously, another group of Africans going directly to Istanbul are the African traders despite the fact that some of them do have highly complex mobility patterns. These 'floating' traders usually stay for short periods of time, such as a certain number of days or weeks. The movements of people involved in this business can be of a long- or short-term character, thus rendering the distinction between 'traders' and 'migrants' rather thin (Steen 2012).

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5 There is a gender bias in this research. For the male researcher, female migrants appeared to be more difficult to approach. Let alone, to follow-up with them through time and space (for more information, see Schapendonk 2011).

Second, there are migrants who are deliberately undertaking long and fragmented journeys to reach the city of Istanbul (eventually with the aim of moving onwards to the EU). These migrants travel a long way through, for instance, Lebanon and Syria, before reaching the Turkish territory. One example is John, a 25-year-old Nigerian who explained how he moved to Damascus, the capital of Syria, before the war started. He held a three-month valid visa to Syria but he only stayed there for three days as he already knew someone who could transport him to the border with Turkey. However, he was caught by the border guards and was put in a detention centre for several weeks. Altogether, it took him more than a month to travel from Nigeria to Turkey via Syria.

Third, there is a group of migrants who have left their countries of origin without the intention of making Istanbul their destination or even their transit point. More often than not, these migrants already have long migration histories and have travelled to various places before Istanbul came into their frame of reference. One Nigerian woman by the name of Beauty left Nigeria with her husband in the year 2000 to work in Lebanon. They had intended to earn money so that they could in turn ‘invest in life’ in Nigeria. They lived a rather satisfactory life in Lebanon until the woman lost her job as a domestic worker in 2006. In the same year, the Lebanese war broke out. This combination of factors made the Nigerian family to decide to leave Lebanon abruptly and to move to Istanbul which is considered as a place where new opportunities can be found, including the possibility of entering Europe. Other trajectories in which Istanbul emerged as a(n) (in-between) destination involved going through various other countries such as Egypt, Sudan and Morocco.

Thus, while some migrants aim to reach Istanbul right from the beginning in order to (1) build up a life there; (2) stay only temporarily in the city and return to the countries of origin after a certain period of time; or (3) move onwards to the EU, others end up in the city in more or less unexpected ways. It is furthermore important to note that some migrants also move to Istanbul because all conventional channels to the EU are blocked. Hence, their only option is to make use of extralegal means. This indicates that the border-control policies of Europe have a direct and profound impact on the migratory routes of African individuals, turning these into lengthy and risky trajectories. Moreover, it suggests that locational and trajectory thresholds, including high costs of migration and Turkish transit policies, are not only factors that inform the decision-making process *before* a migrant’s departure takes place, as Van der Velde and Van Naerssen (2011, 222) indicate. In fact, these factors may also affect migrants’ *actual* mobility processes in direct and indirect ways (Schapendonk 2011). In the next section, the focus is on the en route factors of migration processes by presenting migrants’ experiences in Istanbul.

### **Meeting the Border: Settlement, Transit, and Circularity in Istanbul**

Migrants’ diverse routes to Istanbul lead also to diverse living situations in the city. Some are embedded in clear institutional frameworks, of which African university students is a good example, whereas the life of others is characterized by irregularity, insecurity, frequent police harassment and lack of a stable income. In this respect, it is relevant to note that there are a few NGOs trying to help improve the life situations of irregular migrants and asylum seekers. The diverse churches, some set up and led by migrants, have been important in giving daily support to the migrants (for an elaboration on this, see Suter 2012). Nevertheless, many migrants complained about their precarious living conditions and about police brutality in Istanbul. They talked about ‘raids’ that have taken place to scare migrants away from certain areas, racial discrimination and

verbal insults, as well as about dubious controls whereby money, clothes and mobile telephones were confiscated from migrants. As illustrated by the following quote of a Comorian student, even migrants who are legal and institutionally embedded face similar problem of oppression and discrimination by the authorities:

The biggest problem for Africans here is the police situation. One day I was walking through Tarlabasi and I looked in the face of a policeman ... he looked back ... and the trouble started. He asked me to stop and he checked me. He was saying that I was a suspect in drugs trade, I said I was a student and showed him my card ... But he didn't look at it. He asked for my passport, and you know what happened? They took my passport, and gave me back a copy, just a paper. This was two months ago and still I don't have my passport. I have written many letters ... to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here ... to my home country. But nothing helped. (Interview Amir, Istanbul, May 2008)

The precarious living conditions in Istanbul tend to compound and complicate migrants' transit situations in the city, meaning that there are many obstacles preventing them from living a peaceful and integrated life. These conditions could even result in some migrants deciding to move to Europe despite their initial plan of remaining in Istanbul.

This context has made migrants very creative in finding ways and means to sustain their daily income. Although there are migrants with relatively settled and well-paid jobs, such as being English language teachers, workers in telephone houses and cybercafes, and semi-professional football players (Steen 2012), most of the migrants interviewed are employed in the large informal sector of the city. The researchers came across, among others, migrants selling watches to tourists and working as domestic workers in the homes of rich families. The quick-to-get jobs, also popularly known as *chabuk chabuk*, meaning 'do it quickly' or 'hurry up' in the Turkish language, have become important in this respect. This informal labour system works as follows: Certain recruiters, also known as 'connection men' by the migrants, go to migrants-concentrated neighbourhoods to hire labourers for short-term work which are often heavy, manual jobs such as carriers at construction sites. These middlemen would shout 'chabuk chabuk' through the streets to attract migrants to join them (see also Steen 2012; Brewer and Yüксеker 2006; Suter 2012).

While many migrants do not achieve upward socio-economic mobility through these informal jobs, nevertheless, quite some successful careers in the booming transnational trade between Turkey and African countries were encountered (Steen 2012; see also Özkın and Akgün [2010] for more information on African-Turkish trade relations). While many actors in this particular form of trade are transient and mobile, moving between China, Europe, the Middle East and Africa (Bredeloup 2012b), there are specific roles reserved for migrants who have stayed for a longer period of time in Istanbul. Some of them act as guides and translators and assist the African traders in the markets, others play the role of managers to import/export goods in the name of businesses located in Africa. From starting out as managers, some migrants manage to set up their own businesses later on and become traders in their own right. From then on, they are often involved in circular mobilities between Turkey and their countries of origin. As a result, other forms of trade-related services, such as accommodations and restaurants, were also set up by migrants to support these traders and their trade (Steen 2012; Schapendonk 2013).

What is interesting about this contrast between precarious living conditions and emerging opportunities is the fact that migration aspirations become highly changeable and migration decision-making processes shift in terms of geographical orientations. There are different dynamics at play here. As stated earlier, there are migrants who live a relatively stable life in Istanbul only

to ‘fall into transit’ as a consequence of the ‘inconvenient’ or less conducive sociopolitical climate or because they think that they can improve their lives by moving to Europe. As one Burundian respondent explained:

Students who fail [the exams], fall into transit, they are waiting to go to Europe! Like a Congolese friend, he is in France now. Actually, he didn’t even fail [his exams]. Many people come here as students but feel that they can have a better life in Europe, so they go! So this also makes you think, what if I fail? I don’t know, but I probably would not go back to my country; I probably would go to Europe. (Interview Isac, Istanbul, April 2008)

For others, the opposite is true as their transitory status becomes one of settlement over time. This is illustrated by the case of Caroline, a Nigerian woman who had already lived in Istanbul for seven years when she was met in 2008. In the first years of her stay, she had tried to enter Greece several times but all her attempts had failed. She reflected on her situation:

Life continues, when you tried something without any success you have to try your luck somewhere else ... I decided to stay here in Istanbul. I only want to rest now, build up my life, raise my children and live the best life I can. I tried to go to Greece several times. But I failed. But I think God helped me with that, God has let me fail to let me see that life is not only about changing places. Life is about satisfaction, about rest. Now I know that life in Greece is not much better than here in Turkey; there is no paradise on earth, not in Europe, not in Canada; you have to create your own paradise. (Interview Caroline, Istanbul, April 2008)

Then there are migrants who are involved in circular mobilities, such as the aforementioned traders. However, some migrants also move between their countries of origin and Turkey in the hope of finally reaching Europe. The author has met a Senegalese migrant who entered Istanbul for the third time on a temporary visa. With his trips, he had tried to move to Europe. Similarly, a Nigerian man who had been in Turkey twice explained he would try his luck to reach Europe when his visa was about to expire. In the event of failure, he would repeat this strategy and renew his visa in his home country, return to Istanbul and try to go to Europe again. Thus, while transit statuses are often associated with a sense of waiting and immobility, some ‘transit migrants’ are actually mobile, moving across borders (Schapendonk 2012).

Finally, some migrants have predominantly negative experiences of Istanbul as the place they do not want to live, yet they cannot leave either. This was for example the case for four friends from Ivory Coast who entered Istanbul with the help of a football agent. This agent had arranged for these young men to play in a football club on probation. However, he abandoned them and kept their passports and, worse, the club did not hire them after the trial period. As a result, they became undocumented migrants after their visas had expired and they found themselves stuck in Istanbul, unable to move back to their countries of origin. Neither was it easy for them to move onwards to Europe as they could not afford to pay for the cost needed to smuggle them to the continent (see also Bazuin 2011).

### **Over the Threshold: Passages to Europe**

By means of telephone conversations and internet, contact with six respondents was kept up for a period of approximately two years. Of these six migrants, three have managed to reach the

EU. In addition, four respondents who were encountered inside the EU (three in Greece, one in the Netherlands) transited from Istanbul. Thus in total the research includes seven migrants for whom Istanbul was the actual springboard to Europe. Six out of these seven migrants passed the Turkish-European border by means of an irregular boat trip to Greece. They moved from Istanbul to the harbour city of Izmir from where the sea passage was arranged by middlemen. Most of them reached the Greek island of Samos. One respondent, however, had a less turbulent trajectory as he married a Dutch woman during his stay in Istanbul. This marriage was his gateway to Europe; hence he did not have to enter as an irregular migrant. This at least suggests that irregular border crossing is not the only way for Africans to reach Europe from Istanbul. In this respect, it is also important to note that many migrants who claimed asylum in Istanbul were hoping for a resettlement process in other countries in 'the West', such as Canada and the United States.

Although six migrants among the respondents for this research had entered the EU in a similar way (by undertaking a risky journey over sea), their trajectories have been very different. Three migration stories are highlighted below.

### *Destiny*

Destiny is a Nigerian man of 31 years old (in 2008). He arrived at Samos in August 2008 in a rubber boat with approximately thirty other migrants. Once he arrived there, he pretended not to speak English to hide his identity and subsequently the Greek authorities took him to the reception centre on the island. He stayed eight days in 'the camp' and was brought to Athens afterwards. There he applied for asylum, and he was given a 'pink card' by the authorities; this document proves that his application for asylum was underway. From then on, he lived in Athens for several months but he was unhappy there. He found Athens to be a very violent and insecure place with a lot of competition among migrants and thus considered to leave for another place. In the meantime, he started a relationship with a Greek student living in Heraklion (the capital of Crete) so Destiny decided to go to Crete to live with her. During that period he had two contrasting strategies. One was to work on his relationship with his girlfriend in order to marry her so he could regularize his stay in Greece. The second strategy was to save money and leave Greece in order to move to Austria where one of his Nigerian friends lived. To achieve this, the money was saved without the knowledge of his girlfriend. When the relationship did not develop in the way he had expected, Destiny decided to leave Greece as soon as he had saved enough money. He went to Patras, the harbour city of Greece that is heavily controlled against irregular migration from Greece to Italy, and from there he took a ship to Italy. He finally reached Italy in the summer of 2011. He stayed there for two months and then moved on to Switzerland – instead of to Austria, as he had heard that the asylum procedures in Switzerland are less strict. In August 2011, he applied for asylum there and was sent to an asylum centre in a small village not far from Zurich. The Swiss authorities did not grant him asylum and instead started the repatriation procedure. So Destiny had to move again. This time, he returned to Italy. From there, he tried to navigate his way through the EU – hoping to find a good place to live.

### *Joseph*

Joseph is a young Nigerian man who lived together with Destiny in Istanbul. At that time, they were very good friends and saw each other almost every day. Joseph also reached Samos in August 2008 and was sent to Athens after spending twenty-two days in the reception camp. Their trajectories began to separate as Joseph went to the island of Corfu soon after he reached Athens, in the hope

of getting a job in the informal tourism industry there. From then on, he started to commute between Corfu and Athens as Corfu was, according to him, ‘good for business, but not for living’. In contrast to Destiny, Joseph was able to improve his social and economic situation quite quickly and was beginning to enjoy life in Greece. Hence, his aspiration of reaching Western Europe, in particular the UK or the Netherlands, began to fade away. In the summer of 2012, however, this all changed again. The desperate political and economic crisis in Greece affected Joseph badly. He was especially worried about the recent increase of xenophobic attacks against migrants. During a telephone conversation he assured that he planned to leave Greece within a year because he did not want to stay ‘in this troubled country’.

### *Said*

Said, a 42-year-old man from the Comoros Islands, has had a long and complex migration history before he entered the city of Istanbul. He dreamt of reaching France, the country where his brother was living. After staying for seven months in Istanbul, he reached Greece in 2008 in the same way as Destiny and Joseph: by rubber boat. However, his situation in Greece differed from the situations of the Nigerian migrants as he pretended to come from Somalia. Based on this, he managed to obtain refugee status from the Greek authorities. This refugee status, as Said explained, has made it possible for him to travel legally to another European country. He went to France in 2009 and joined his brother in Marseille. However, after the first weeks, Said became frustrated because of the lack of (financial) assistance from his brother. Subsequently, he moved in with another Comorian family in Marseille. According to Said, there is widespread solidarity among Comorians in Marseille; his stay with this family was a good example. In the meantime, he threw away the Greek asylum papers, as this would, according to Said, complicate the process of becoming a French citizen. He was hoping to obtain French residency by marrying Cherolle, a woman with a Comorian background and a French passport. Nevertheless, during a visit in Marseille, he emphasized that his future plans were still quite open:

I live here for several months but without papers. That makes the situation bad. That is why I say I go to the Netherlands one day, because my situation here is not certain. Like this house, I will stay in this house of course; the people help me and understand me. But I would move out of the house if I hear that there is a small job somewhere! (Interview Said, Marseille, December 2009).

### *A Synthesis: Turbulence and Thresholds*

Even though the outcomes of the above-mentioned stories are different, they have several commonalities too. First, the step-by-step and fragmented character of these processes is self-evident. These migrants have not only changed places, their living situations had also transformed because of changing social connections (in the case of Destiny and Said), changing sociopolitical climates (in the case of Joseph) and changing legal statuses (in the case of Said). In these fragmented and turbulent processes, flexibility and insecurity appear to be the two sides of the same coin. Migrants can easily adapt their plans to changing circumstances because they hardly have any formal obligations in terms of housing, social connections and employment that tie them to the place. This makes them flexible and mobile actors, as argued by Jordan and Düvell (2002). At the same time, the lack of legal status, the lengthy asylum procedures and the limited opportunities to upgrade their socio-economic statuses can make it all the more difficult for these migrants to reach their desired standard of living and/or their aspired destinations. Having passed one threshold,

or one physical border, the migrants in question are more often than not confronted with new thresholds and different borders in their trajectories.

In terms of the threshold approach as presented in this book (see also Van der Velde and Van Naerssen 2011), in none of the above-mentioned cases it is very clear where locational factors end and where trajectories factors begin. A refugee status is easily considered a ‘keep factor’ as it makes staying in a particular country more secure and comfortable. This, however, does not count for Said as he had used this status only as an enabling factor to make his onward journey to France. Destiny’s relationship with his Greek girlfriend shows a similar mechanism. Initially, this relationship seemed a factor that would facilitate his stay in Greece but it rather became an enabling factor for his onward movement because it made it easier for him to save money since most of his daily expenses were covered by his girlfriend. Furthermore, when we compare the two Nigerian cases of Destiny and Joseph, we notice that similar factors can have very different outcomes. After a certain period of time, both Joseph and Destiny’s economic situation had improved. For Joseph, his improved situation was a reason to stay in Greece but Destiny preferred to use his savings to try his luck elsewhere in Europe and thus moved on to Italy. This suggests that we should investigate migrants’ individual mobility processes carefully as mobility and immobility can mean different things to different people in different situations (Adey 2006; see also Schapendonk and Steel 2014). The way individuals value their mobility/immobility is an important factor that influences their migration decision-making processes.

### **Conclusion: Migrants’ (Im)Mobility and Migration Trajectories**

Istanbul is an important migration hub for African migrants who are heading for Europe. The growth of the economy and employment in the informal sector of the city has provided opportunities for documented, as well as undocumented migrants in terms of their upward socio-economic mobility. One of the most important opportunities for migrants is to get into the transnational trade sector (Steen 2012; Schapendonk 2013). As a consequence, Istanbul is not only a point of passage for Africans, it is also a destination and a place of circular mobilities in its own right. Istanbul is also regarded as a place where migrants may constantly adjust their future plans, where new dreams emerge and where migratory directions change. It is a threshold place where precarious living conditions and new opportunities are contrasting realities that can coexist.

This contrasting reality is important in understanding the fragmented migration trajectories from Africa in the direction of Turkey, and eventually, Europe. Both the temporal and spatial dimensions of trajectories are important in this respect. Whilst not equating migrant trajectories as migrant life paths, it is, nevertheless, important to realize that similar events have different values for different migrants when these occur in different periods of their lives. As shown in the case of Caroline, the strength of the migrant’s motivation to move matters, despite repeated failures in crossing into Europe. Similarly, without falling into geographical determinism, it is fair to say that the evolution of a spatial trajectory also influences migration aspirations. As we have seen from the examples highlighted above, being in Istanbul may intensify the longing to reach Europe in the case of migrants who are confronted with precarious living conditions. However, being in this specific location may also result in new contacts with new information that can profoundly influence future plans. As a result, we can hardly understand the outcomes of these fragmented trajectories by only focusing on migrants’ (rational) decision-making before their departures. These trajectories are not the outcome of clear-cut and instant ‘go/no-go situations’ in which the migrants decide to move or to stay (see also Grillo 2007). As Van der Velde and Van Naerssen (2011) rightly argue,

trajectories may involve sequences of decisions, and a series of thresholds may appear to migrants in no particular order. Migrants' trajectories may be affected by multiple plans, unexpected events, (bad) luck, changing political climates and encounters with new people. Trajectories are process-like phenomena, and migrants' decisions must be considered as embedded in these processes.

How then do we make sense of the trajectory as a relevant unit of analysis in migration research? The proposal put forward here is to understand trajectories in the same way as relational geographers understand places (see for instance Massey 2005; Amin 2002). Like places, trajectories are always in the making, always evolving and always affected by 'a set of thrown-together factors' (Massey 2005). This relational starting point, however, does not imply that migrants are perceived as being endlessly and restlessly on the move, never able to find a place to settle down. On the contrary, in the course of this research, many migrants were met who were living happy and satisfied lives in their destinations, also in Istanbul. A relational perspective on migration trajectories does mean, however, that we should not perceive migrants' settlement as something permanent – as something that lasts forever (see also Skeldon 1997). Moreover, it means that we should not equate migrants' settlement with a form of spatial fixity and assimilation. In fact, as underscored in the transnational debate (see for instance Portes 1997; Baas 2009), it is the integrated and institutionally-settled migrant who is in the favourable position to become a transnational actor, moving from one place to another and feeling at home wherever s/he is. Settlement, thus, goes hand in hand with new mobilities which may in turn affect individual migration trajectories.

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