

African Worlds in Istanbul: A workshop report

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The following is a report about the workshop, African Worlds in Istanbul, held in Beyoğlu, Istanbul, on October 17th, 2022. Organized by Lesley Nicole Braun (University of Basel, Switzerland), presenters included Claudia Bülbül (Istanbul Ticaret University, TÜBİTAK project), and Güler Canbulat (Istanbul Gelişim University). Discussions were enriched by Roberto Castillo (Lingnan University, China), Brigitte Suter (Malmö University, Sweden), and Katrien Pype (Leuven University, Belgium). This event served as a propitious occasion in which international academics encountered each other to share about past, ongoing, and upcoming research projects, as well as to discuss ways forward for future collaborations.



Picture by Lesley Nicole Braun (2022)

Diplomatic connections between Africa and Turkey were reinforced in the 2000s by the development of airline routes, as well as the growing presence of Turkish media in many African countries. Premised on exploring the increasing presence of Africans in Istanbul, this workshop aimed to examine the ways in which Africans are embedding themselves in Turkish society through an array of professional, creative, and transnational trajectories. Additionally, the workshop considered the drastic transformations ushered in by the Internet, and information and communications technology (ICT) and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Capturing the vast and complex connections of African presence in Turkey, Lesley Nicole Braun's paper, *Taped-Up Chains: Congolese trading in a post-pandemic world*, provided new theorization about the establishment of empires—of logistics, visas, informal trade, and money transfer—layered upon the constellations of trading routes that include crucial nodes such as Kinshasa, Guangzhou, Dubai, and Istanbul. These connections are embodied in individuals who themselves represent entire infrastructures of influence. Congolese trader women are not solely trading as buyers and sellers, they also act as entire marketing departments. Some of the administrative tasks associated with their businesses can include modeling their products, photographing, and documenting the process of their daily work.

Through their participation in international markets, traders have developed an intimate understanding of the rhythms of global trade. These rhythms include the sound of the opening and closing of national borders, of the emergence and disappearance of opportunities for profit—all connected through the sound of packing tape, “the soundtrack of globalization”, as one of Braun's Congolese interlocutors put it. One melody resisting straight-forward theorization, despite its leading role in international wholesale markets, is that of trust which is continuously negotiated through the channels of globalization and articulated by the individuals acting within them.

Often obscured in analyses about trading networks—especially as they relate to larger notions of change, disruptions, transiency, and (im)mobility—are information and communication technologies. Güler Canbulat's paper, *Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as a Tool to Create New Business Models for Congolese Migrants*, illuminated some of the technological practices integral to transnational trade. ICTs have played a fundamental role in the decisions taken by traders regarding job opportunities, product selection, as well as destination choices. Since traders were unable to travel during the pandemic, their immobility accelerated the increase of online orders, thereby introducing new competition with wholesale dealers over customer-networks connected through Whatsapp groups. Whilst some African middlemen and

guides in Istanbul were bypassed by this development, others nevertheless found new opportunities to do business.

The omnipresence of ICTs, and the ambiguous potentials and challenges they pose to African traders is indeed a growing topic of research. Challenging optimistic narratives about online worlds, Katrien Pype's interventions highlighted the "hidden costs" associated with such technologies. Despite the seemingly growing opportunities and lowering of costs for traders making the most of the Internet, research must continuously take into account practices of extortion, misuse, surveillance by state and non-state actors, and abuse shaping virtually mediated social networks.

Discussions about the politics of visibility connect to Claudia Bülbül's paper, *African Artistic Aspirations in Istanbul: Encounters in urban, digital and discursive spaces*. She explored identity building processes as they relate to leveraging African visual and musical spaces on a famous Turkish TV show and competition called *Bir Başka Güzel*, or "A different kind of beauty". Bülbül's analysis investigates one specific show contestant who identifies as Afro-Turkish and whose performance drew on self-essentializing practices. This led another contestant to challenge the understanding of "Africa" communicated by the performance and interpolated the judges to assert their own ideas about African fashion and culture.

Identity and nation-building are fraught with multifarious processes that include notions of "elsewhere". In Turkey, Blackness is often articulated through images from the American context—a strategic reference since the US maintains a significant cultural presence in Turkey where modernization and Westernization narratives play an important role in nation-building efforts. Such triangulations are precisely addressed by Roberto Castillo's work on Blackness in China—a context where sub-Saharan Africans are also perceived through the prism of African American culture imported to China.

Aspirations, desires, and opportunity-seeking require a variety of strategies which include cultural brokerage: contact zones such as Istanbul become the stage of (fleeting) connections between different actors tied to disparate locations across the globe. This was echoed in Brigit Suter's question to Braun following her presentation: "What does it *mean* [for Congolese, but more generally, African traders] to begin traveling to Istanbul [after being barred from entering China due to COVID-19 measures]?"

Directions for future research emerged from the conclusions that have crystallized out of the exchanges during the workshop. Firstly, the categorization of spaces requires a reconsideration which would allow for more nuance to emerge. For instance, the limitations of thinking of Turkey as merely a place of *passage* or *destination* was repeatedly raised. Some impulses for future research in that direction were already provided: these spaces could be qualified as “spaces of desire and opportunity” (Katrien Pype) and understood through their transient character (Roberto Castillo). Whilst the localized strategies thought to provide avenues towards a better life might shift with the changing rhythms of globalization, the overarching goal itself seems to remain a constant in the equation. Secondly, there is a need for more data, notably for statistics and aggregated data—not only in order to strengthen the claims made by qualitative and ethnographic research—but also to contextualize and situate the observed phenomena and dynamics more accurately over time and place. Finally, a deeper engagement with emic terminologies would productively increase the quality of ethnographic analysis relating to the movements of peoples in and between African countries and Turkey.



From left to right: Anna Vollmer Mateus, Brigit Suter, Lesley Nicole Braun, Claudia Bülbül, and Güler Canbulat (2022)