

MIGRATION, MINORITIES & REGIONAL IDENTITIES

Turkey and the Black Sea region are located between various geographical and political areas: Europe and the Balkans, the former constituents of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Iran and the Middle East. Their location has inevitably constituted them as a physical bridge and placed them at the crossroads between different historical forces and empires. This was as much a feature in prehistoric as in historical and contemporary times when cross-boundary migration remains an important domestic and international concern. The interplay between geographical factors, diverse political entities and patterns of migration has been a significant factor in shaping the countries' domestic and social make-up. It has played an important role in forming cultural identities, whether at individual, regional, national or supra-national level. Simultaneously, these processes in relation to migrant communities have also influenced the neighbouring areas around Turkey and the Black Sea region. This strategic research initiative aims to promote research across different academic disciplines that relate to the themes of migration in Turkey and the Black Sea region.

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The Africa Cup

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On any given Saturday in June, if you get off the Istanbul metro at Ulubatlı, stroll along Adnan Menderes Bulvarı and peer into the small municipal stadium, you will be met with an unusual sight. For one month every year, this unremarkable corner of Turkey's largest city is transformed into a hub of international footballing activity. Ghanians, Nigerians, Sierra Leonians and hundreds of other African migrants living in Istanbul come together to take part in a football contest.

Named the 'Africa Cup', the tournament is an annual fixture for the African community in the city, providing a chance for fun, competition and communal solidarity. It also serves as a venue for men with dreams of playing professional football to catch the eye of agents and managers. First launched by African migrants in 2004 or 2005, since 2012 the tournament has been funded and hosted by the municipality of Fatih, one of the districts that make up greater Istanbul.

For over two years now I have been conducting ethnographic research at the Africa Cup, exploring the various people it brings together – African and Turkish, prospective footballers and agents, those looking for fun and those seeking employment and fame. I stumbled upon the tournament when conducting research for my book, *Welcome to Hell? In Search of the Real Turkish Football*, which was published in spring 2018. It immediately caught my attention

because it encapsulated many of the themes that interest me about Turkey today: its transformation from a country of net emigration to one of net immigration, the massive growth of its sports industry and Istanbul's emergence as a 'world city'. In the thoughts and activities of the Turks and Africans involved in the tournament, we glimpse the difficulty of 'making it' amidst the increasingly neoliberal business models of sport and the pressures often placed on those who are outsiders in Turkey.

Attending games, I observed the importance of ideas of 'hospitality' to the functioning of the tournament. The special status of the *misafir* (guest) in Turkish culture is held up – by both Turks and outsiders – as one of the nation's emblematic characteristics. Fatih municipality makes much of its benevolence in putting on this tournament for African migrants. 'Both as a state and as a nation we try to do what we can to make them feel they are not alone', one of the local officials told me.

The municipality undoubtedly spends thousands of lira on organising the tournament, as well as providing free kits and stadium access. It may well be true that some of its employees are driven by the zeal of helping the less fortunate. Yet ethnographic research and interviews with the Africans taking part in the contest revealed that they did not always find that being subjected to hospitality was a positive experience.

Just as the sated guest who has found their plate yet again piled with more food will attest, displays of hospitality can be unwelcome, even oppressive. Some of the African participants I spoke with felt that excessive displays of Turkish benevolence denied them the agency to assert their own autonomy and to ‘make it’ as football players in Turkey. Disputes frequently emerge over the council’s handling of the tournament. ‘Fatih *belediyesi* [municipality] have no right to take this tournament from us’, one participant angrily shouted in one such encounter. ‘We do it to enjoy our African solidarity not to impress them – do you understand?’, another participant exclaimed.

Many players at the Africa Cup have dreams of playing in one of Turkey’s top professional leagues. Earning money as a foreign footballer in Turkey requires two official documents – a residence permit (*ikamet*) and a football license (*lisans*) – both of which are difficult to obtain.

The greatest help the municipality could provide to the players would be with navigating these bureaucratic hurdles. They prefer instead to shoulder the costs of hosting the cup, suggesting that it is the agents, managers and scouts who come to the tournament on the lookout for new talent who can help these players. ‘The way these Africans are being “saved” is actually [through] these clubs’, a council employee told me. ‘If the clubs decide to transfer them, they can get their residence and work permits.’

The employee’s response reveals much about the ascendancy of neoliberal conceptions of governance within Turkish state structures. Rather than shouldering responsibility, the state entity (the municipality) merely provides the platform. It is for the private organisations – the clubs – to come in and ‘save’ the players. Whilst some are happy with the arrangement – ‘With Turkey organising it, it’s more better’, one player told me – others angrily reject the language of paternalism and positioning of Africans as agentless. ‘We have fifty-four countries, we are not a small continent!’, one coach shouted during one particularly heated exchange.



The intertwining of the discourse of hospitality with neoliberal forms of governance paradoxically has the effect of limiting the opportunities for migrant footballers. By being permanently labelled as guests, they remain outside the mechanisms of the state and are denied the permits needed to take part fully in society and earn a living. Legislation hence mirrors the cultural logic of the ‘guest’, whose welcome is only ever contingent and time-limited.

The wider implications of this conceptualisation of African sporting migrants are manifold. Whilst the majority of Africans in Turkey see their stay as temporary, there are some who settle. For these people, being seen as a guest is a barrier to full participation in life in Turkey. This issue looks like becoming only more pronounced. There are over 3.5 million Syrians based in Turkey, a small number of whom have already made the move from resident to citizen, but who in the minds of many Turks will not alter from the fixed idea of the ‘guest’. In sport in general, and the African Cup in particular, we perhaps glimpse the increasingly unequal and fraught mediations that growing inequality in the world system is producing. Not only Turkey but the world as a whole will have to devise better strategies for ‘hosting’ in the years to come.

