

# HOPES IN TRANSITION

An Ethnography of African Migrants  
in Istanbul

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Abdirashid Diriye Kalmoy



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AKADEMI

# **HOPES IN TRANSITION**

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## Hopes in Transition

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Abdirashid Diriye Kalmoy

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Abdirashid Diriye Kalmoy



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His research focus is the political sociology and history of Eastern Africa; sociology of religion, migration, borders and borderlands studies, and Horn of Africa geopolitics. He has contributed opinion-editorial articles to Daily Sabah, Politics Today, Modern Diplomacy; Africa is a Country, The Elephant and Hiiraan Online.

Dedicated to,

My father

Diriye Kalmoy Jelle Ibrahim Dini Jaamac

My mother

Ceebla "Foos" C/Karim C/Rahman Xareed Duqoow

My brother

Jamaal

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## Preface

The act of migration is many things: it can be political, economical, spiritual, psychological or emotional depending on the varying contexts that occasion migration. Migration in the context of this book has a political and economical emphasis and approach – I am interested in the life experiences of sub-Saharan African migrants in Istanbul who escaped economic degradation and violence in their home countries and geographies. In this sense, migration becomes an act of survival and betterment of livelihoods, which is intrinsic in every being in the universe. Migration involves a leap of faith into the unknown with will and at times desperations. It becomes an intuitive reflex of self-preservation, and of loved ones from conditions one is not able to control such as ethno-tribal and state violence, and economic devastations that lead to unemployment and social strife. Migration across nation-state borders or within the migrants' own country is a human undertaking that involves the will to exist, thrive and self-actualize that challenges and transcend geography, race, religion, or politics. The migrant is a traveller who does her/his best to find life, existence and meaning in a world that is chaotic, threatening and full of uncertainties – what a humbling metaphor that captures every being's situation in our cosmos. The migrant is not an “another”, a foreigner or an invader into our lands. The migrant is an image reflected back to us if we closely looked; we are migrants, in one way of another – geographically, corporeality or emotionally.

I have experienced migrations and long-distance travelling on a personal level in my childhood; leaving a familiar home is a feeling I am also familiar with. Our family moved from town to town in Kenya when I was young: Mandera, Nairobi, Limuru, Naivasha and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)

in the early 1990s; Isiolo and Meru in the late 1990s; then finally Mandera and Beled Xaawo (Somalia) where I schooled my primary education. After finishing my primary school education in 2007, I joined Nakuru High school, a prestigious boarding boy's high school in the middle of the Rift Valley, every term I would take a journey that would take three days of bus ride from the border-town of Mandera to Nakuru.

I would only visit my family and home town once in the year: The December holidays. Home-sickness, mild depression and longing for familiar social and geographical milieu of family and friends was a constant companion. At such a young age, I become familiar with life's storms, stress and trials of traveling far away; in retrospect I view those years as the foundations of my strength, resilience, joy and patience. Furthermore, in 2012, I would travel again far from home to pursue undergraduate education Turkey. I would only visit home once: the summer of 2016. As of the writing of this research project, I haven't visited or seen home for close to four years and counting. Hence, given my personal history, it would suffice if I consider myself a perennial "migrant" who is always on the move, crossing large swaths of geographies, joining different educational institutions, making many good friends and encountering inspiring teachers and educators. These experiences have psychologically, emotionally, spiritually and ontologically shaped me – and continue to re-shape me as a person and my worldview.

Prior to the commencement of this book, in the summer of 2019, I received a call from a distant relative in Nairobi informing me that Bille (not his real name) will be arriving in Istanbul in few days. Later, Bille himself called me and requested if I can pick him up from Istanbul Ataturk Airport. Bille was in his late forties; he worked as a taxi driver in Nairobi; he had five children and a hard-working wife who sold children clothes in Eastleigh, Nairobi – he was among the relatives I visited in Nairobi in the summer of 2016. Bille secured a health visa – he had a genuine heart and lung problems that made easy for him to secure the visa – through the facilitation of a travel agency and a hospital in Istanbul after paying approximately 3000 US dollars. However, Bille had other plans in mind. I took him from the

airport, and he stayed at a small hotel in Eminonu for few weeks; I would visit him few times and take him around Istanbul's historic scenes.

Bille, through a network of friends in Nairobi and Addis Ababa, found a Somali human smuggler who would take him across to Greece. The next time I visited him, he was in Aksaray staying in an apartment alongside other sub-Saharan African migrants. The father of five children going to primary school in Nairobi was expending his life-time savings to become a migrant and move to Europe for a better life. Eventually he would attempt three times to cross the border but would be arrested and returned to Istanbul. Finally, in December 2019 Bille called me on WhatsApp from Athens. He sounded happy and joyous. I wished him all my best wishes and prayers.

In 2019, I had no interest in Migration studies. I was preparing a research project on the oral history of state and tribal violence in North Eastern Kenya. Unfortunately, after writing the two chapters of literature review and methodology, Covid-19 became a full-blown global pandemic and it was untenable to carry out that project due to travel restrictions. There was no way of conducting a fieldwork without endangering myself and others in the process. Moreover, travelling was rendered impossible by the pandemic and the restrictions to travel.

After days of frustrations and uncertainties I settled to initiate a project on sub-Saharan African migrants here in Istanbul given its feasibility and my interactions with migrants in Aksaray, Istanbul. My experiences of migrations and travelling ingrained in me were "yelling" for attention and recognition I suppose. As much as this research is about sub-Saharan African migrants in Istanbul, it also resonates on a deeper level with my family and personal history and experience. In the course of my ethnographic interviews, I interviewed migrants and refugees who could easily be a family member or a relative – and their stories, experiences, testimonies and voices had similar trajectories and contents as mine. This book is about migration, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers by a global migrant, and an avid traveller. As a descendant of Somali pastoralists and nomads who criss-crossed the Horn of Africa (Geeska Afrika) for millenials, this book is a personal coming-to-terms with the life-styles of my nomadic ancestors, the

phenomenon of global migration and modern global nomadism which is becoming a trend and norm in our highly interconnected capitalistic world that has rendered travelling a source of fetish and base-pleasures for many and also an exercise and an undertaking of seeking life and livelihood for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Abdirashid Diriye Kalmoy

Başakşehir, Istanbul

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