

## The ironic life of African migrants in Paris

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In Paris recently I noticed an extraordinary phenomenon unfolding around the Eiffel Tower during a casual afternoon stroll. The *sans-papiers*—as the undocumented migrants are known in local parlance—vended touristy souvenirs around the Champ de Mars, Place du Trocadéro, and the Palais de Chaillot. They often played hide-and-seek games with the police to avoid detection. Struggling migrants from Africa—or more specifically from countries such as the Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Mali, Senegal, Eritrea, and Niger—these vendors live a shadow life in Paris and survive in a particular type of parallel underground economy of the city's tourism industry. Curiously, they sell mostly one product: miniature replicas of the Eiffel Tower. Their surreptitious economic footprint wraps around Gustave Eiffel's soaring tower, built in 1889 to commemorate the centennial of the French Revolution.

Here is the great irony. The *sans-papiers*—whose best self-defense in a hostile environment, one would imagine, is to be socially invisible—make a living peddling the most visible, conspicuous architectural icon of Paris. Many of them cross the Mediterranean Sea in rickety boats risking their lives, gradually move from different port cities to the cultural and economic heart of France, and, finally, occupy a social space that accidentally conflates two most unlikely global conditions: the migrant's unstable, floating life, and iconic architecture, percolating within the transient space of global tourism.

The story doesn't end there. The miniature Eiffel Towers are made in China. The socially invisible migrant sells the most visible architectural trope of French cultural chauvinism to tourists from across the world.

The state system seems to tolerate the *sans-papiers* as long they are humanoid silhouettes, not real people with real names, real addresses, real families, and personal histories. Always at the mercy of the state's shifting migration politics and the focus of many worried gazes, they are the spectral protagonists of a global narrative, one in which Europe, Africa, and Asia converge at the foot of a wrought-iron tower.

The social dramas that take place around the Parisian monument offer poignant narratives of modern migration, globalisation, xenophobia, anticipation, and nationalist angsts. Thus, the migrant's story couldn't be explained away as one of mere resilient survival.

In 2005, estimates of France's illegal immigrant population were placed somewhere around 400,000 people. Undocumented migrants have been trickling into Paris. According to some aid groups, as many as 100 migrants pour into Paris, the "City of Lights," each day. The dream is to get asylum in France or cross the English Channel to eventually reach Britain. In 2016, over 160,000 migrants crossed the central Mediterranean Sea to arrive in Italy and other European destinations. Many perish in the rough waters of the sea. The United Nations Refugee Agency reported that 239 migrants drowned in two boat capsizes alone in 2016.

The crisis has sparked new kinds of transnational dialogue. European government officials have been trying to persuade African governments to beef up their efforts to minimise the northbound traffic. Aid and other forms of international cooperation have been promised. For instance German Chancellor Angela Merkel travelled to Ethiopia, Mali, and Niger to discuss how the refugee crisis in Europe could be resolved through sharing resources and offering military aid.

Why are African and Asian migrants flocking to Europe en masse?

Many African observers believe that the current migration crisis is a result of some of France's postcolonial practices. French businesses brought large numbers of workers from former African colonies as cheap labour. Current migrants continue to come to France with hopes of finding work, building a better life, and joining family members who have already settled there. They also try to escape from ethnic conflicts, civil wars, corrupt governments, and lack of economic opportunities in their home countries.

Furthermore, there is this entrenched belief among Africans that France has built enormous networks of corruption across Africa in collusion with African leaders. Still, many desperate Africans believe that risking their lives in a perilous boat journey is far better than living under a

constant threat of death in their native countries, devastated by ethnic rivalry. A brighter life is only one sea voyage away, no matter how precarious it is. Thus, the crowded boats on the Mediterranean are signs of extreme desperation and anxious global mobility.

When some of the people survive the dangerous sea journey, arrive at the Eiffel Tower, and begin vending its Chinese-made miniature version, globalisation and national identity dovetail in a saga of unlikely protagonists and their hide-and-seek economies. As much as the Eiffel Tower, the *sans-papiers* inadvertently become new emblems of France and a category of “Frenchness” that the country projects on to the world stage.

Like the uncertain and unwelcome lives of the migrants roaming around its base, the Eiffel Tower's beginning was dubious. Before it was inaugurated on March 31, 1889, Gustave Eiffel's monumental structure attracted the wrath of many of France's famous writers, artists, and intellectuals, who wrote a scathing letter, rejecting the iron “monstrosity” as fundamentally incompatible with French values and aesthetic consciousness. Eiffel sought to justify his creation on both aesthetic and functional grounds, offering a range of historic precedents and a seemingly inexhaustible list of practical uses for the tower.

In the 21st century, the *sans-papiers* find themselves in a somewhat parallel situation, having to justify their presence in France on grounds of human rights, open-society ethos, and social justice. The great French writer Guy de Maupassant hated the Eiffel Tower, the then-tallest human-made structure in the world (the record previously held by the Washington Monument), yet he lunched at the restaurant located inside the tower, so that he wouldn't have to see it. By going in, thereby internalising it, Maupassant self-choreographed a love-hate relationship with the Eiffel Tower.

Here is another uncanny parallel with the undocumented migrants, who suffer constant humiliation of social exclusion in their adoptive country, while, paradoxically, selling her undisputed cultural symbol to thousands of global tourists each day. Their livelihood depends on the very icon of the country that frequently refuses to give them legal status. The Eiffel Tower is the epitome of French pride and the refugee's uncomfortable hope for the future.

Could Gustave Eiffel in the late 19th century imagine a more ironic practical use of his monument as the subterfuge of anxious migrants?