

## SPACE FOR INFORMAL ACTIVITIES

*Interview with Michaela Pelican ([Junior Professor of Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Cologne](#), Germany) on African Migrants to China and the Middle East. The interview was conducted by Tobias Schwarz.*

*Tobias Schwarz: Michaela, what is the main focus of your research?*

Michaela Pelican: I'm working on migration from Cameroon to the Gulf States – in particular to Dubai – and to China – in particular to Guangzhou. Both cities, Dubai and Guangzhou, are centres for trade, and this attracts migrants from many parts of Africa. My focus is on Cameroonians who live in these two cities.

*TS: South-South migration is not a new phenomenon, yet the migrants from Cameroon you are following to China and to the Gulf are in a particular new situation: China has not received many international immigrants in its past; also, Dubai has become a destination for migrants from Africa relatively recently. Can you briefly outline the basic characteristics of these two migration routes?*

MP: That's true. Both migration routes started only in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to become more relevant as a result of the closing borders to Europe and the economic growth in the Gulf as well as in China. At the same time, many job opportunities disappeared in Cameroon due to economic recession and the effects of structural adjustment programs. Hence many people were looking to find other opportunities, often within Cameroon in the informal sector. But there was also a vision for going abroad, basically within Africa to other neighboring African countries, such as to Gabon or South Africa, or to other centers where they could find more economic opportunities.

As I pointed out in an earlier paper ([Pelican and Tatah 2009](#)), Dubai and China emerged as an extension of these economic opportunities abroad. So, most people who are going to either of these destinations are first and foremost looking for trade opportunities. The destinations in Asia are new for immigration from Africa, because beforehand only a few African traders would mostly go to Shanghai or Hong Kong,

Thailand, and Singapore. It was not that such routes did not exist before, but they were run by few, individual traders. The same applies to Dubai.

Only recently, the latter became a very attractive destination. In the 1990s, more people started to bring goods, such as mobile phones from Dubai, and it became known as a center for trade. Therefore, more and more people became interested in this trade route. On top of that, the immigration regulations there are much more liberal than they are in Europe. Basically you can go there on a tourist or short-term business visa and try your luck, either to buy goods and transport them home, or to find a job. This is what many young Cameroonians then started to do.

China emerged alongside as a similar destination for the same kinds of reasons. The huge difference is that in Dubai people can speak English, and this makes it easier in terms of finding your way around. China became attractive for those who have a lot of capital to invest and who would go directly to factories to command the production, and then export the goods back to Cameroon and neighboring African countries. So you find different types of migrant traders: those with limited capital and an interest in buying smaller quantities tend to go to Dubai, while those with more money and pre-arranged business contacts venture into China. This is the perspective from Cameroon.

*TS: Can you describe more in detail the composition of the Cameroonian emigrant population in Dubai?*

MP: I started doing fieldwork in Dubai in 2008 and I have been there three times – in 2008, 2011, and 2014 – and witnessed some developments. As compared to migrants from South and Southeast Asia, the number of Africans is relatively small; about two thousand Cameroonians live in Dubai on a more permanent basis. People travel in and out more frequently, but those who are there on a permanent basis are relatively few, because in Dubai you can get a work contract for no more than two years, then you have to renew it. As I have described in more detail in a recent article ([Pelican 2014](#)), many are working as intermediaries for traders,

helping them to buy their goods, finding hotels, making deals, acquiring their visas, sending money in and out. Also, over time, more and more people have got into the formal economy and some of them have employment in hospitals, malls, banks and so on. So you can see that something like an established labor migration route between the Gulf and Cameroon has been emerging. I also noticed more and more travel agencies that offer visa to Dubai at a relatively moderate price, even by Cameroonian standards, and even more so compared to the cost of a visa to Europe.

*TS: And how large is the community in Guangzhou?*

MP: I have visited Guangzhou in 2013, 2014, and 2015. The Cameroonian community in China is probably about the same size as in Dubai, but you can find three main categories: businesspeople, students (those with scholarships offered by the Chinese government, but also self-sponsored students), and English language teachers. The latter are professionals who were often also teachers back in Cameroon. They were recruited either by the Chinese government or the Confucius Institute, or arrived on their own initiative; that is, they just went to China and found schools to work in there. Hence this is a more diversified group, and their individual experiences are also somewhat different. I mentioned before the language difference: if you want to get along in China, especially in more rural areas and not only in the biggest cities, speaking Chinese is a must. This puts considerable stress on the Cameroonian migrants.

On top of that, the number of foreigners in China is very small, below 2 percent of the whole population, so you can imagine the kind of attention the African migrants attract. Also in the Gulf States, Africans are a minority. But in Dubai for example, the proportion of the population comprised by foreigners is 85 percent, so even while only a very small proportion are African, it still generates a different feeling of multiculturalism, internationality and so on, if you have people from India, Pakistan, the Philippines and many other parts of Asia, from Europe, etc. In contrast, the situation in China is totally different. Black Africans are very visible foreigners,

and they attract a lot of attention in public. In Guangzhou, the population has become somewhat used to having Africans there for quite some time now, because Guangzhou is a trade hub and because of the Canton fair which attracts foreigners from all over the world. There is also an Arab community, so they are in some ways more open to having foreigners than in the more rural parts of China. But still, the Africans attract a lot of attention – sometimes positive curiosity, but often they experience it negatively. So it is indeed quite challenging for them to be there. Some of these challenges have also been reflected in the [photo-exhibition that I have organized together with the Chinese photographer Li Dong](#) at the University of Cologne in autumn last year. Interestingly, however, I found that there are two major and quite different impressions Cameroonian migrants have outlined in their conversations with me: One is that China seems culturally and linguistically so different, and so difficult to adapt to, that you cannot feel at home there. On the other hand, there are also those who have learned Chinese and have found their way into Chinese society, and who much more appreciate being there and benefitting from the economic opportunities that are offered in China.

*TS: Having talked about a specific experience of South-South migration: Do you think there are characteristics of migration in the South that stand out – and which are probably even typical of the Global South – compared to the Global North?*

MP: I can only talk about migration by Africans to destinations in Asia – both located in the Global South. Yes, we can see a pattern, in that there is a stress on entrepreneurship. People are trying to find ways to establish themselves economically, which also includes the informal sector. In Europe or in the USA, the informal sector is much more regulated, and harder to enter. I have the impression that these destinations – like the Gulf States and China, but also other destinations in South East Asia – are now becoming more and more interesting for Cameroonians and others, precisely because these countries' immigration regulations are not yet very fixed or exclusionary, at least where entry as a trader or a "tourist" is concerned. So you

can find ways to go there on relatively easy ways in a sense that the visa is not as expensive and the restrictions are not as high as they are, for instance, for the EU. There is also more space for informal activities. From the perspective of African migrants, I think this is specific to the Global South, as compared to the Global North.

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