

THE PHANTASM OF LUCK: A PRECARIAT'S NOTION OF SURVIVANCE IN ISTANBUL

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The article draws upon ethnographic research conducted over 18 months (2021-2022) among people who engage in state-regulated games of chance in Istanbul. I examine how they construe their participation in games of chance to unravel the motivations behind their engagement in economically uncertain activities during times of financial and economic crisis. The article offers a nuanced understanding of the human experience related to involvement in games of chance. Rather than focusing solely on the clinical and moral judgments associated with gambling, it presents how the use of games of chance paradoxically serves as a technique to renew the players' hopes to endure the uncertain social, economic, and political realities they face. I observe that my participants are primarily chasing luck, that would bring wealth, and the fleeting moments of amusement promised by games of chance. I suggest conceptualising their technologies of imagination for envisioning a more favourable future (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen 2009, Bear 2020) through their pursuit of good fortune and socially embedded play as acts of survivance that defy the annihilation that economic struggles and precarity and continuous work brings and revitalise their presence (Vizenor 2009) to endure instability, precarity, and anxiety of the future.

Keywords: Games of chance, precariat, survivance, luck, Istanbul

At Eminönü square²

Lotteries and other numerical chance games offer 'larger than life' dreams, in exchange for the small price of the ticket. They make life wider, as wide as your

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² All names mentioned here are pseudonyms. The fieldwork was partially supported by financial grants from my department, the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography (SAME), and my college, St Antony's, at the University of Oxford. This is part of my doctoral research on state-regulated games of chance in Istanbul and how my research participants conceptualise risk and luck and the ways in which they deploy speculative activities such as gambling to ameliorate uncertainties in the Turkish context.

dreams and imagination do, so you do not feel suffocated by daily burdens.
(Zeynep, research participant. Winter 2021, Istanbul)

In December 2021, I went to *Eminönü* Square in Istanbul to get a lottery ticket from the '*Nimet Abla*' Kiosk, a lottery selling point famous for being the luckiest kiosk to get a ticket from in Turkey. The 2022 New Year's Eve lottery draw was promising a big prize, as is the case every year since the establishment of the Turkish National Lottery in the early 1920s. A few hundred people formed messy queues waiting in front of the kiosk to purchase their tickets. It was less crowded than the previous years when many people who come from all over Turkey, not only Istanbul, would form large queues to purchase a lottery ticket from the famous '*Nimet Abla*'. We were during the COVID-19 pandemic, and people were still wearing masks, many of them dropping the mask to cover their mouths while breathing normally through their noses.³

'We are lucky to have come on a relatively less busy day. People are still considering COVID-19 and trying to avoid crowded places', Zeynep, the participant whom I was accompanying, told me. In the 2022 lottery, the grand prize amounted to 120 million Turkish Lira (equivalent to 5,266,200 GBP). The Turkish lottery offers tickets in three ways: quarter, half, or full. It is common for individuals to purchase various quarters to diversify their opportunities. Each quarter ticket is priced at 30 TL (1.32 GBP), while a half ticket costs 60 TL (2.63 GBP), and a winning quarter means winning a quarter of the grand prize. By acquiring multiple quarters, such as the four purchased by Zeynep, lottery participants automatically enhance their likelihood of winning as they participate in different tickets. Zeynep recounted that thinking about the New Year is almost synonymous with the National Lottery; both promise a new start. She said: 'I bought one for me and I will give the other three quarters as gifts to my mother, father, and husband. It is a habit and a New Year custom that I share with many people here which renews our hopes for a new start and better life.'

Zeynep is 35 years old, married with two children, and works as an assistant and apprentice in a hair salon, a temporary job that she had to accept without a work contract and can end abruptly anytime. Since her husband's job is also a temporary one as a construction worker, she started the job in 2018 to help with her household's expenses. She lived and worked in *Maltepe*, a neighbourhood located on the Asian side of Istanbul where I also lived. Zeynep was one of the first people to agree to participate in my research and kindly introduced me to other participants. We agreed to go together to *Eminönü* which is on the European side of Istanbul. Zeynep brought her daughter with us and asked her to choose the five tickets, including mine. Zeynep said: 'I always ask one of my children to choose the tickets, children have pure hearts. They are like lucky charms that attract good luck.'

The distance required almost an hour and a half of transportation to get from *Maltepe* on the Asian side to *Eminönü* on the European side. It is a relatively long distance from where Zeynep lives and works. I told Zeynep that she could have easily got a lottery ticket from mobile lottery sellers or from one of the various kiosks that sell the tickets in her

³ During my fieldwork in Istanbul, I observed that many people dropping masks under their noses was a significant phenomenon. This was strange to me because it did not prevent the spread of the virus, but it complied with the state's rule of wearing masks. There have also been campaigns encouraging people to wear masks correctly.

neighbourhood. ‘From *Nimet Abla!* I usually buy four-quarter tickets from *Eminönü*’s kiosk. It is the place where you can find good luck’, Zeynep said. Zeynep explained that she thinks of the distance and waiting in lines as requisites for getting lucky, saying ‘Getting lucky is not that easy. To find your luck, you need to make some effort to obtain it.’



Figure 1 – The author’s quarter lottery ticket for 2022 that she got with Zeynep.

Neither Zeynep nor I won any prize. However, the question remains: What attracts people to play a game of chance? Why do Zeynep, and many others, carry on purchasing a lottery ticket, knowing the slight chance of winning a big prize? Since antiquity, luck has been depicted and utilised to refer to the random and unequal distribution of fortune between people. Luck is a popular notion in mythologies and common knowledge, yet its depiction differs from one context to another. Fortuna, the goddess of Luck and fate during Roman times, was depicted as a blind woman who would randomly disseminate fortune between people. While in Turkey, luck comes with the bird of luck – *Talih Kuşu* – who chooses where to land. The people would say that, ‘the bird of luck has landed on your head’ – *Talih Kuşu başına Kondu* – to refer to winning the jackpot or being lucky at certain life ventures. Games of chance beguile people to participate in them, hoping to turn the wheel of their fortune and secure financial wealth. Whether it is a belief in luck or one’s skills, chasing the phantasm of luck is an important motive for playing a game of chance.

Analysing my participants’ experiences related to their involvement in games of chance can serve as a lens through which we can discern the cultural, social, and personal factors influencing their participation in specific economic activities (Sahlins 1974). Indeed, humans are not solely economic actors but are deeply intertwined with their social systems (Polanyi 1977). This holds relevance in the Turkish context, where people who are participating in lotteries are intricately connected within their collective social networks (Granovetter 1985). For example, like Zeynep, they share the tradition of gifting lottery tickets to family and close friends during the New Year’s draws (Hassan 2023).

The way people perceive luck and play has been commodified into profit-making ventures within the realms of the gaming and commercial gambling industries (Malaby 1999, 2003; Scott 2003; Schüll 2012; Pickles 2019; Cassidy 2020). I perceive these industries as extractive economies that exacerbate inequality, prey on people’s dreams, and exploit them.

Nevertheless, this article's primary objective is to delve into my participants' narratives to understand the motivations and reasons behind their choice to engage in games of chance, even when the chances of winning are exceptionally low, particularly during periods of heightened uncertainty. The concept of survivance, introduced by Vizenor in the context of theorising the narratives of the struggles, living through traumatic events, and resistance of Native American people (Vizenor 1994, 2009), aptly characterises my participants' 'technologies of imagination' (Sneath, Holbraad, and Pedersen 2009) in their pursuit of good fortune and their participation in games of chance. I suggest that the active agency of my participants as seen in their utilisation of their imaginative narratives about winning the jackpot along with finding enjoyment in the fleeting and ludic experience of engagement with games of chance, represent forms of their survivance. This survivance is exhibited in the renewal of their hopes and dreams of easy wealth, utilising their pursuit of luck, that allows them to endure life and to 'resist the annihilation' (Vizenor 2009) and hopelessness of our contemporary neoliberal sensorium.⁴

The semantics of survivance acknowledge the fact of the living and of life itself (Fassin 2010). The concept recognises people's persistence, resilience, and presence despite the oppression, crisis, and violence that deplete them (Vizenor 1994, 2009). I see survivance as an ongoing process that remains elusive and does not guarantee absolute security or safety. Therefore, an analytic of survivance encompasses the dichotomous interplay between precarity and reliability, suffering and enduring, and surviving and thriving, allowing for a vision of life that extends beyond docility, passivity, and victimisation (Povinelli 2021). I argue that the analytic of survivance aids in the interpretation of the employment of play (Malaby 2009) and pursuing luck as a means of coping with life, and redeeming the time invested in labour, anxiety about the future, and the overwhelming realities of subjugation (Hammering 2022). Additionally, I suggest that the notion of survivance allows for an understanding of engagement with games of chance that goes beyond the clinical point of view, which focuses only on the brain model of gambling addiction with its clinical predictability and moral judgments. Instead, survivance as an analytic shows how the consumption of games of chance makes sense to my participants, and speaks to their techniques of enduring uncertain social, economic, and political realities through the imagination of wealth beyond ceaseless labour, as well as viewing life as a whole as a gamble itself (Malaby 2003). The article thus provides an understanding of the games of chance industry in Turkey that goes beyond, yet still accounts for, moralising criticisms of its social and individual harms and of extractive gaming and gambling economies more generally.

The anthropologist Klaus Hammering provides an excellent example of ways in which construction workers in *Sana'yi* neighbourhood in Japan redefine their relations with their masculinity and 'being a man' through paying their gambling debts. Hammering argues that their betting habits during the weekends compensate for the time they spend at work and redeem it (Hammering 2022). Being indebted and claiming the dignity to repay it, Hammering argues, contributes to the imaginary of being a man in the context of his research (Hammering

⁴ I employ the term 'sensorium' to underscore the significance of how individuals perceive, engage with, and interpret neoliberal structures. It emphasises the experiential and interpretative aspects of our engagement with these structures.

2022). Gambling habits, although perceived as ‘negative excess’, can be considered acts of resistance against capitalist times in which workers perform dangerous physical labour (Hammering 2022). Despite their being indebted from betting, Hammering argues that their debt repayment shapes and configures their understanding of what being a man is, emphasising the dignity of debt repayment (Hammerings 2022). This sentiment extends beyond the pathological aspects of gambling and the moralistic lens that views people engaged in betting or games of chance as reckless, irrational, and lacking the ability to practice self-control.

The recent economic crisis in Turkey, which began in 2018, and the pre-election debates leading up to the 2023 Turkish presidential election, have exacerbated socio-political tensions and financial hardships for the Turkish people (Yücel and Kabalay 2022). I start the article by situating the ethnography within the current Turkish economic struggles to draw a bigger picture of the context to which my participants relate. I present their narratives of engagement with numerical chance games to examine how the imagination of luck and the desire for an ‘egalitarian luck’ was augmented through Turkish cinema and the advertising campaigns of the state-regulated games of chance industry. Specifically, I focus on their participation in the national lottery and numerical chance games, such as scratch cards and numerical lotto, during times of socio-political and economic uncertainty.

Uncertain times and games of chance

My fieldwork took place amidst a global pandemic and the economic turmoil in Turkey in 2021-2022. During this period, inflation soared to more than 80 percent, and the Turkish national currency depreciated by 44 percent against the US dollar (Güngen et al. 2021). The devaluation of the national currency resulted in a shortfall in the monthly income of individuals receiving their salaries in Turkish lira, exacerbating their financial hardships. Turkish political scientists Yücel and Kabalay have highlighted the political and economic nature of the increasing number of suicides related to economic issues in Turkey since 2018. They argue that these tragic suicides are deeply intertwined with the consequences of the neoliberal transformation in Turkey since the 1980s, as well as the policy decisions made by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government (Yücel and Kabalay 2022). According to their analysis, the marginalisation of the working class, the erosion of their political and economic influence, and the impacts of heightened financial speculation and financialisation have left people in a state of precarity and indebtedness (Yücel and Kabalay 2022). Furthermore, the uncertain political and economic climate in Turkey leading up to the 2023 presidential elections, coupled with the economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has given rise to an increase in speculative economic activities. These include currency trading and the emergence of the cryptocurrency market in Turkey (Saka 2020). Mert, one of my participants who I will introduce in the coming pages, told me that,

Everything is more expensive now. The Turkish Lira is losing its value. The inflation contributed to the increase in the prices of food. We try to buy and store groceries for the coming months because the prices change every day.

There is no proper insurance in the *lokanta* [local restaurant] where I am working now. It can suddenly get closed anytime like the case with many shops in Istanbul.

(Istanbul, Winter 2021)

However, attributing the economic crisis solely to economic indicators such as the inflation rate and currency crash would overlook the social and political influence on economic policies and reform plans (Gür et al. 2019). A political economic analysis of the current crisis would attribute the current economic uncertainty to political causes that started with the attempted coup d'état in 2016 (Gür et al 2019; Yücel and Kabalay 2022). Subsequently, the increased economic uncertainty has encouraged misleading speculation from investors in the Turkish financial market which exacerbated the economic crisis (Gür et al 2019; Yücel and Kabalay 2022). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has furthered the economic and financial struggles of the people leading to the loss of 2.6 million jobs (Baez and Demircuc-Kunt 2021). The impact of COVID-19 has also led to increased vulnerabilities due to economic insecurity and precarious working conditions, leading to a disproportional impact on the impoverished and the marginalised (Baez and Demircuc-Kunt 2021). Women and informal workers were at the forefront of this economic vulnerability, since female workers were three times more likely to become unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic as they work in jobs affected by the lockdown measures, such as tourism, food, and hospitality (Baez and Demircuc- Kunt 2021). In a survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), more than seven out of ten respondents from Turkey expressed concerns about not being able to earn enough money to survive (OECD report 2021).

Moreover, Turkey stands out for its notably long working hours, ranking among the highest among the OECD countries (Merican 2020). This extended work schedule has various consequences, including health issues such as obesity (Merican 2020) and a tendency to engage in activities that appear to compensate for the time dedicated to work, such as gambling and drinking. Therefore, I argue that involvement in games of chance within such a context can be seen as a means of survival, a technique for reclaiming the time consumed by long work hours (Hammering 2022). Additionally, it serves as a response to heightened precarity, prompting people to harness their imaginative capacities in speculative and absorbing pursuits like betting and games of chance, as a way to cope with the challenges of their precarious living and employment situations.

Games of chance industries thrive through the state's support because of the windfall tax revenues they contribute to the national economy (Cassidy 2020). Turkey is no exception. The country has a well-established and state-regulated game of chance industry. For instance, in 1926, three years after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the National Lottery was launched to support the Turkish National Pilots' Association and was called *Tayyare Piyangosu* (Airplane lottery). Nationalist sentiments were closely tied to participation in the National Lottery to support the newly Turkish modern state and its pilots' association. Nimet Abla was the name of the first woman who popularised the National Lottery ticket and increased the sales and demand for the Turkish lottery during those times and afterwards, and her kiosk

became the popular trademark for selling the lotteries.⁵ In 1939, the national lottery administration was established, and the *Tayyare Piyangosu* was renamed the *Milli Piyango*, or 'National Lottery' (Tunçay 1993; Yaşar 2010; Uğur 2015). It remains lucrative and contributes to the national economy, channelling taxes to national projects, particularly the Turkey Wealth Fund, which was established in 2016 and managed directly by the country's president (MilliPiyango Report 2021).

Although gambling and games of chance may have the same logic, interestingly, however, my research participants treat games of chance and gambling differently. They describe gambling as only related to casino life, including card games such as poker and roulette. However, state-regulated games of chance such as the lottery, numerical chance games, betting on sports, and horse racing are 'games' that offer prizes as acts of play, not of a gamble. For them, games of chance were regarded as means of finding their luck. They also regarded the games as affordable entertainment activities that enhance socialisation and recuperation with family and friends. Gaming prioritises play and entertainment (Malaby 2009), unlike the stigmatised medium of *gambling* which often indicates wasting money, being irresponsible, and recklessness. My participants also associated gambling with being rich or with people who are part of a class of business professionals and the upper middle class, who are secure in terms of affluence or wealth.

The Turkish state regulation of the industry has contributed to their perceptions, as Turkish law has distinguished gambling from games of chance and framed games of chance as legitimate and legal while gambling as illegal (Yaşar 2010). Turkish legislation defines the legal, state-regulated 'games of chance' (*Şans Oyunları*) as 'games played for a cash prize such as lotteries, numeric games, and instant win games'. On the other hand, 'gambling' (*Kumar*) is defined as 'games played for a gain where profit or loss depends on chance' (Yaşar 2010; Uğur 2015). Despite the legitimisation of the industry by the state and its popularity among the people, it is a contested topic that triggers debates about religion and politics leading to polarised opinions, especially after the privatisation of the National Lottery Institution. Additionally, in 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the Turkish National Lottery administration launched a phone application, which makes the engagement with numerical games of chance convenient anywhere and anytime for those who are over 18 (MilliPiy Report 2021; Hassan 2023).

Participation in numerical games of chance invokes both secular and religious sentiments among the people, who debate the permissibility of games of chance. In one of our conversations, Zeynep said:

⁵ *Nimet Ablâ* serves as an iconic symbol for acquiring lottery tickets in Turkey. Obtaining tickets from the renowned *Nimet Ablâ* Kiosk holds great significance, almost as a ritualistic tradition, especially during the New Year. People firmly believe that her kiosk dispenses elusive lucky tickets. However, I purchased numerous tickets and none has proven fortunate. *Nimet Ablâ*, originally known as Melek Nimet Özden and born in Istanbul in 1899, is a historical figure who ventured into the world of ticket sales, starting with lottery tickets from the Turkish Aircraft Association. Operating from a strategic location in front of the *Eminönü Yeni Mosque*, her shop served as a tobacconist, lottery, and money exchange place. Nimet Ablâ faced scepticism about a woman succeeding in this profession and managing challenges, such as collecting payments for sold tickets. Despite doubts and refusals from some suppliers, *Nimet Ablâ's* success story and the winning tickets from her kiosk made her reputation grow and continue till now. See <https://www.nimetabla.com/>

I heard that playing the lotteries is considered a sin in Islam.⁶ But I still buy my New Year lottery ticket. I pray, fast Ramadan, and consider myself a practicing good Muslim. But I always get a ticket for the New Year or try the numerical lottery [*sayisal lotto*]. My grandmother was religious, but she would always get *sayisal lotto* on weekly basis. She would always say that luck is waiting for us to find it. Who knows, maybe I will win one day or maybe I buy out of habit. I also remember my dear grandmother, who passed away, every time I purchase the lottery. I have to try the game to get my luck. Otherwise, I will be hoping to be lucky without actively taking part in it. I can see the increase in advertising billboards about new types of lotteries and this makes me curious to try them.
(Istanbul, summer 2022)

Zeynep points out that the influence of her 'habit' of buying lottery tickets, remembering her grandmother, as well as her efforts to find her luck, counter her doubts about the religious permissibility of games of chance. Another lottery participant, Dicle, recounted:

I think it is all a show pretending that they are a pious government. They, the government, compete to be more religious than previous ones, but they do not care about religion. It is all a façade. Their religion is money. They use whatever they can to extract money from the people to participate. The government wants all of us to play games of chance. Since 2020, we have a new official phone application for the National Lottery Institution which made it much easier and more accessible to participate in different numerical chance games.
(Istanbul, Winter 2021)

The National Lottery (*Milli Piyango*), numerical chance games (*Sayisal Oyunlar*), and instant win scratch cards (*Hemen Kazan*) are regulated by the National Lottery Administration which falls under the Ministry of Finance. The administration was privatised in 2019-2020 and is currently operated by the private company *Demirören* Group Holding, the same corporation which owns most of the media and entertainment channels in Turkey.⁷ This turned lottery participation into a political topic, questioning the relations between the government officials and the private company managing the lottery.⁸ Privatisation has amplified the mistrust in the state and many people called for the removal of the word 'national' (*Milli*) from the state lotteries because people are questioning the transparency of the lotteries, the possibility of corruption, and doubting the utilisation of its revenues in charity work⁹ (Hassan 2023).

Turkey has witnessed multiple economic crises that led to hyperinflation in the early 2000s and shaped its social, cultural, and political changes over the past three decades (Kamp

⁶ Islam opposes 'easy gains' that are obtained without making an effort. Gambling is forbidden in Islam, because it constitutes access to 'easy wealth' that does not come from hard work. One word for gambling is *maysir*, 'made easy', which comes from the Arabic root *yosr*, or 'easiness'. Islam has identified *maysir* ('easy gain', i.e. without labour) as forbidden or satanic (Quran 5:90-91). Islamic principles also posit that in gambling, usually the winner takes money that was destined for another person.

⁷ See <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2019/08/29/milli-piyango-resmen-demirorende>, 'The National Lottery officially belongs to Demiroren.'

⁸ See <https://www.diken.com.tr/milli-piyangoda-bilet-satisi-dibe-vurdu-demirorene-guven-yok/>, 'Lottery sales are decreasing because there is no trust in Demiroren.'

⁹ See <https://www.birgun.net/haber/milli-piyango-bayileri-odasi-baskani-ozellestirildikten-sonra-yasanan-guvensizlik-satislari-dusurdu-371123->, 'There is a state of mistrust since the privatization of the lottery.'

et al 2014). Süleyman Özcan and Sezgin Açıkalin, two Turkish economists, examined the relationship between the misery index, linked to low income, and lottery games in Turkey over the period between 2005 and 2013. They showed that people's engagement with lottery games increases at times of financial hardships, because people are relying on luck and hopes of winning the jackpot during times of economic uncertainty and high inflation (Özcan and Açıkalin 2015). Therefore, games of chance industry flourishes during times of recession and economic uncertainty (Cassidy 2020) which gives us a cause to consider how hopes and imaginaries of luck thrive during states of precarity to a point that defies the pragmatics of savings and thrift at times of economic crisis (Hassan 2023).

The lottery and the precariat

It was probable that there were some millions of proles for whom the Lottery was the principal if not the only reason for remaining alive. It was their delight, their folly, their anodyne, their intellectual stimulant.
(Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*).

In his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell predicted a future in which both authoritarianism and totalitarianism have controlled and homogenised society and the dissemination of the truth. Orwell wrote about the lottery of the proletariat, who waited for its promised prizes weekly. The effects of lottery consumption and the correlation between participation in the lotteries and the socio-economic background of the people engaging with it have been subject to scholarly work and literary fiction, concluding that there is an inverse relation between lottery participation and socio-economic conditions (Beckert and Lutter 2013).

Guy Standing introduced the concept of the 'precariat' as a transition from the traditional proletariat, arguing that it better encapsulates the changes in contemporary social stratification (Standing 2011:12). This term combines 'precarious' and 'proletariat' to signify the unstable and exploitative nature of modern life, work, and the pursuit of stable income (Standing 2011). The proletariat, once a class and society marked by social and intellectual struggles and achievements, has largely become dependent on precarious employment conditions. Anthropologist Anna Tsing contends that precarity has become a widespread condition in our modern era (Tsing 2015: 2). She characterizes precarity as 'life without the promise of stability', a state marked by the uncertainty of existence and the experience of living through various crises (Tsing 2015: 2). However, Tsing's work explores the resilience of Matsutake mushrooms, which were the first living organisms to emerge after the blast in Hiroshima (Tsing 2015: 3). This serves as a contemplative reminder to observe how life can break apart and mend amidst the ruins of capitalism and its destructive modes of production (Tsing 2015: 3).

The distinction between precariousness and precarity, which Judith Butler (2009) has also addressed, acknowledges that precariousness is an existential condition for all people. Social relations and solidarity can ameliorate this state of precariousness in different situations (Butler 2009). However, precarity as a condition further highlights the structural disparities,

such as class, gender, and educational background, of the state of human precariousness and that renders impoverished and marginalised people more vulnerable than others (Butler 2006, 2009). In Butler's words, 'precarity is a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2009:25). My research participants, in this article, are considered less fortunate than others. They are workers who do not have a stable source of monthly income and rely on their manual labour to maintain a daily living. They did not complete their education and their livelihoods, whether as flexible or scheduled labour, depend on working for long hours daily. They work in various unstable jobs: as an apprentice in a hair salon, a worker in a small restaurant (*Lokanta*), a seasonal waste picker, a junior clerk in an advertising company, and a temporary construction worker who works on heritage restoration sites in Istanbul. The flexibility of their working conditions gives my participants a sense of freedom that was simultaneously synonymous with instability and financial insecurity. Their conscious musing on 'luck' that will come one day, and its renewal every New Year with the big lottery draw, keep them enlivened by wishful thoughts of a better future.

The Turkish lottery institution has played a significant role in fostering the idea of luck and invoking the politics of hope associated with participation in games of chance which, I argue, plays a role in counteracting the influence of precarity on the people. The slogan '*Herkesin Şansı*', or 'luck is for everyone', was actively promoted in various lottery games administered by *MilliPiyango*, the National Lottery Institution in Turkey. This phrase underscored the notion that everyone possesses the potential for luck, attainable through the purchase of different numerical chance games. As part of the marketing campaign, it was proclaimed that 'Everyone's luck' can be found at the National Lottery dealers situated in all 81 provinces of Turkey. The use of the words 'everyone' and 'luck' in this slogan mobilises the concept of hope for a form of egalitarian luck, one that is equally accessible to those who seek it. I propose that this phrase resonates with the contemporary Turkish context, where ideals of justice and equitable resource distribution are promoted as part of the state's propaganda within a populist political discourse rooted in political Islam. This aligns with the populist Islamic rhetoric of the Justice and Development Party (JDP-AKP), which is the longest-serving Islamic party in Turkish history, holding power since 2001 (Kirdiş 2021). The party's approach combines a 'thin theological base' with a 'majoritarian interpretation of Islam' and employs a 'Muslim unity rhetoric' (Kirdiş 2021:2). Within this framework, even activities like games of chance, typically considered forbidden in other Muslim-majority countries, are adapted by the state to create the appearance of luck being made seemingly and paradoxically equitable.



Figure 2 – Stills from a MilliPiyango (MP) advertisement on its channel on YouTube¹⁰

Ya çıkarsa! – What if I win?

I first met Mert next to the Kiosk selling lottery tickets and chance games in *Kadıköy*. He arrived after he finished his shift at a *Lokanta* – one of the neighbourhood’s restaurants. I got his contact from the father of my friend, who used to meet Mert in the coffee shops to play board games.¹¹ Usually, the one who loses the game would pay for the drinks. Mert is 50 years old, has three children and a wife, living in *Sancaktepe*.¹² Mert used to be a truck driver, like my friend’s father, before they both retired from the tiring job. Mert purchased ten five-lira scratch cards from the kiosk, costing him 50 Turkish Lira (2.2 GBP) in total.¹³ There are different types of scratch cards, but he picked the cheaper ones. However, the cards still promise big prizes, such as 200,000 TL (21,468.53 GBP). These scratch cards are called *Altın Kazı Kazan* – the golden scratch-off. Mert said:

These cards are my favourite game of chance. I do not need to wait to know if I won or not like the lottery. The exciting moments are between buying the scratch cards and sitting or standing in front of the kiosk to scratch the icons on the card to reveal the prizes. My heart beats a bit faster the same way it used to be when I was younger. I think about this moment when I’m bored at work. I work in a *Lokanta* nearby and I pass by this kiosk on my way to ride the bus home. Being the person who handles the customers and makes the dishes to be served is tiring. It is less tiring than my previous job as a truck driver, but it is also a boring job that lacks any excitement. Sometimes, I get the scratch card during my lunch break, or when I’m buying cigarettes from the kiosk.

¹⁰ This is part of a new marketing campaign that started in 2020. The mascot of *Milli Piyango*, the National Lottery, has been always the symbol of *Talih Kuşu* - the Bird of Luck. The Lottery’s motto is, ‘Everybody’s luck’, *Herkesin Şansı*. The third image depicts the new phone application of MP that was launched in 2020.

¹¹ Board games like *Okey* and backgammon are popular in Turkey, and people wager money on them to increase the fun, which is considered an illegal form of gambling.

¹² A neighbourhood that was established on the periphery of Istanbul and recognised as a district in 2009, where squatter houses, as well as gated communities, exist.

¹³ Due to inflation and changes in exchange rates, the prices change frequently. The multiple interviews with Mert were conducted from the winter of 2021 to the summer of 2022. All exchanges from Turkish Lira to GBP are made according to January 2023 rates of exchange.

Mert started scratching off the cards in complete focus. He is fast yet careful not to erase the numbers under the icons of gold drawn on the scratch card. After he finished, he won 10 TL, and he decided to buy two extra scratch cards with them after our conversation, and said:

It is easy to play. For example: if you scratch the 6 golden icons on the card and got one 10 TL under one icon in the first line, and two 10 TL under two icons in the second line, you will win 10 TL. Also, if you got a fourth 10 TL underneath the bonus icon on the side, it will be added to your win, and you get 20 TL in total. You have almost 7 icons to scratch and find the prize underneath, which gives you a big chance of winning something. Sometimes if I win 20 TL, I will buy an extra four scratch cards with the money I won. Sometimes I win 40 TL, and I get a pack of cigarettes with the money I won. I do not have an average expenditure on scratch cards. Some days, I spend more than around 150 TL (6.44 GBP) on scratch cards, other days I rarely buy any. I guess it depends on my mood and my workload that day.

In another conversation with Mert, he told me that he hesitates sometimes before getting the scratch cards, indicating that it is not an impulsive action that he pursues mindlessly. However, when he thinks that he could get lucky, or at least excited that he could win, he purchases the cards. He also thinks that the play element in games of chance compensates for the boredom of labour. Mert said:

Do you think I don't know that I should have spent that money on something better? Like getting chicken or groceries? I know, but I keep telling myself, *Ya çikarsa?! (What if I win!)*, and I buy more scratch cards. Without this hope and the excitement of the possible win, my life would be flavourless.

'What if I win?!', *Ya Çikarsa?!¹⁴* is an idiom that was always used by my research participants when I asked them why they keep on purchasing numerical chance games including lotteries. Its popularity can be traced back to Turkish movies from the 1970s and 80s that depicted stories of lottery wins, serving as motivation to pursue the elusive notion of luck. This idiom featured prominently in these films and was also heavily used in advertising campaigns by the National Lottery Administration in Turkey. According to my research participants, this idiom wields a powerful influence over people when it comes to engaging in games of chance. It serves to dispel doubts and hesitation when making the decision to buy a ticket or participate in such games. This phrase's ubiquity, as an emic term utilised by both the public and lottery vendors, has been disseminated through various media outlets and films, to the point where it has become nearly synonymous with participating in numerical games and purchasing lottery tickets. The phrase not only encourages people to participate in numerical chance games but also carries a significant sense of hope that often overrides rational considerations regarding the odds of winning a lottery ticket or numerical game.

¹⁴ Pronounced as *yaa-tshee-karsa'?!*

The Turkish cinema of this period, known as *Yeşilçam*,¹⁵ promoted stories of getting rich overnight. They depicted the civil servant or the precarious worker getting lucky and hitting the jackpot after buying a lottery ticket by coincidence. Movies such as *Talih kusu* ('The bird of luck'),¹⁶ and *Milyoner* ('Millionaire') presented the train station worker, the civil servant, and the factory worker who won lottery tickets the first time they purchased a ticket, as having beginners' luck, whilst the people who regularly purchase lottery tickets have failed to do so. Hence, the winners start getting paranoid and mistreating their friends and family to protect their winning tickets from theft. At the end of the movie, the winners choose not to have their lottery money and choose to stay poor instead, promoting the message that wealth would make people lose the warmth and honesty of their families and their loved ones. Also, it responded to the belief that lottery money is not blessed, which means that an accident will happen to the winner after winning the jackpot. In another movie, *Korkusuz Korkak* ('Fearless coward'),¹⁷ the civil servant is also convinced to give a second thought to purchasing a lottery ticket when the lottery seller tells him, *Ya çıkarsa?!* These movies have inspired some of my participants who buy lottery tickets and numerical games and were regularly referenced by many of them.



Figure 3 – A still from the movie *Talih kusu*, when the lottery seller is saying *Ya çıkarsa?!*

Mert distinguishes between playing and gambling when it comes to scratch cards and lotto. He emphasizes that these are games, not gambling activities, mainly because they cost him considerably less than what he would spend in a casino. With a chuckle, Mert adds, 'I need to

¹⁵ 'Green Pine.' Named after *Yeşilçam* Street in the *Beyoğlu* district of Istanbul, which served as a hub for numerous actors, directors, crew members, and studios.

¹⁶ See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0253782/>

¹⁷ See <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0252611/>

take some steps towards my luck, and that's by buying scratch cards and numerical lotto. The only way I can think of finding my luck is by consistently spending small amounts until I can locate it... but so far, luck hasn't been on my side.' Despite not winning large sums of money or any significant prizes from scratch cards, he approaches them with a hopeful attitude. Every time he engages with scratch cards, he offers a silent prayer, hoping that one day he will strike it lucky. If that day comes, he envisions using the prize money to purchase a flat or a car. 'I cannot get rich through my work. This is the only way I can dream of being rich one day', he continued.

Mert tried sports betting (known as *iddaa* in Turkish) in the past, but it resulted in substantial financial losses. He acknowledges that scratch cards and numerical lotto games don't require skill; they are purely games of chance dependent on luck. However, Mert has a strategy, a method he believes increases his chances of winning. He buys scratch cards or numerical lotto tickets in bulk, convinced that his odds improve with increased purchases. He diligently observes the sequence of numbers and searches for patterns among the lucky numbers in the lotto. To aid in his analysis, he takes pictures of both winning and losing lotto cards, allowing him to study the number patterns closely. These efforts that Mert exerts in understanding the patterns of winning numbers indicate the thoughtful approach that he follows in his pursuit of luck. Mert does not think of purchasing scratch cards as a hobby, especially when compared to betting on sports or horses, which might show some form of attachment to the sport. Yet, his interest lies in uncovering the patterns within numbers, with the acknowledgment that luck still plays a crucial role in determining his chances of winning. Similar to Zeynep, Mert also has preferred kiosks from which he buys these games because he believes that certain locations are luckier. Indeed, while media influence plays a role in the experiences of my participants, they are driven by more profound and affective motivations, primarily centered on their relentless pursuit of luck in every encounter with games of chance.

The phantasm of luck and survivance

Luck has frequently been associated with concepts of chance and the future (Rescher 1995). This concept encompasses various dimensions, including theological, moral, and economic, with the latter termed 'cosmo-economics' (Da Col 2012). These dimensions relate to ideas of fate, effortless wealth, and undeserved success. Additionally, luck has a social dimension that manifests in social relationships, rituals, and its perception and circulation within different societies (Da Col 2012). Anthropologists Hamayon (2020) and Da Col (2012) stress the importance of studying luck from an anthropological perspective to understand how it varies across different cultures. They note that luck has both material and immaterial functions. While immaterially subject to diverse interpretations and perceptions (Da Col 2012: 4), the material functions of luck are evident in industries and economies that convert social and individual imaginings of luck into monetary profits (Da Col 2012). Luck is deeply ingrained in daily social life and intertwined with human interaction and imagination (Graeber and Da Col 2011; Daniels 2012). It is closely linked to temporality, functioning as an 'omnipotent concept event' that extends beyond the present, allowing people to discuss and imagine the future in

their current moment (Graeber and Da Col 2011). Luck is often characterised by its unpredictable and uncontrollable nature, transcending the conventional principles of 'cause and effect' (Da Col 2012:2).

The National Lotteries and New Year's Eve hold great importance in Turkey, as symbols of fresh starts. During New Year's celebrations, many people purchase lottery tickets as gifts for their friends and family. By providing a lottery ticket, one individual can share the good fortune of others. This custom is based on the idea that luck is a shared resource that can be distributed among people or that individuals can take part in each other's luck. This belief is demonstrated in idioms and rituals, where successful people are touched in the hope of obtaining a portion of their luck. Mert expressed this idea:

In Turkey, some people believe that luck can be passed on from the lucky ones to others. For example, some students would say to a successful student: 'I will touch you to give me your luck to get good grades as well.' That is why I believe that some kiosks and sellers are more fortunate than others because they have either been fortunate with previous winning numbers or lucky people frequently.

In Turkish culture, fate plays a central role and is closely linked to the notions of luck and fortune (Dole, 2012). When my participants experienced a loss in numerical chance games, they commonly attributed it to their fate at that moment. Conversely, when they win, they attribute it to being part of their predestined life paths. The phrases 'Luck is for everyone' and 'What if I win?!' contribute to the collective understanding of fate and luck as predetermined and predetermined (*Yazılmış* in Turkish). According to anthropologist Christopher Dole, who studied healing practices in Turkey, the concept of fate always holds significance, as people acknowledge the influence of external factors and predestined life paths, particularly because Turkish secularism failed to address the spiritual needs of the population (Dole, 2012). Dole highlights the binary opposition between the modernisation that Turkey aspires to and the traditional values it inherited from its Ottoman past (Dole, 2012: 22). While the state imposed secular ideals in public and private life, people often turned to rituals and religious beliefs either within or outside the secular discourse (Dole, 2012). This helps explain the strong connection between luck, divinatory practices, and fate, as my participants attribute good fortune, misfortune, or future life events to what is 'written' in their destiny.

Furthermore, the term '*Kismet*' frequently appears in conversations about luck and destiny. It is a Turkish word that refers to fate or destiny and is also used to refer to luck in various life endeavours, whether it is achieving success in a career or encountering an unfortunate event. This is because belief in luck carries a spiritual dimension as it resides in the realm of potential. The games of chance industry capitalises on this realm of aspiration, hope, and imagination, which includes notions of luck. Although many of my participants indicated that they lack trust in the systems that produce games of chance, the industry's revenue shows a continued pursuit of luck. Anthropologist Keith Hart compared wagering money on the unknown to Emile Durkheim's theory of religious rituals, which connects the known (in this case, the game of chance) to the unknown, such as the game's outcome and the concept of luck. Hart argued that money represents the ultimate unknown in modern life,

and people seek to establish a connection with it through gambling (Hart 2020). I observed this in people's participation in games of chance. Additionally, for Turkish people betting and games of chance are considered forms of engagement with society, such as giving lotteries as New Year gifts or gathering to bet on horses and sports in betting salons.

I therefore argue that luck possesses 'phantasmic' characteristics that make it intangible and mythologised, yet consistently present and rationalised in the minds and pursuits of my participants. The concept of phantasm, as referred to by Derrida, refers to an immaterial imagined presence through which the real and imagined are intertwined (Royle 2010). Derrida has pointed out that a phantasm can refer to misleading representations that can distort reality and its meaning (Royle 2010; Saghafi 2015). Derrida has argued that the concept of phantasm and survivance should be studied in relation to each other (Saghafi 2015), particularly when thinking about the phantasm of death and mortality, including Derrida's own. A phantasm is always present in people's lives, especially through its absence, and is reproduced through language, symbols, idioms, and signs (Royle, 2010; Derrida 2011). Derrida reflected on the phantasm of death that haunts the living and can be conjured through tracing its presence in people's lives. I argue that the phantasm of luck, which is present in the lives of my participants, is fuelled by hope as much as Derrida's phantasm of death is maintained by living. The phantasm of luck in the Turkish context is shaped by symbols such as the bird of luck, the idioms that have been discussed earlier, and the public and media discourses that present the possibility of winning a jackpot, promising a better future that is yet to come. Luck, although absent from the lives of the precariat participants discussed in this article, is present as an imagined possibility and destination, an absent presence that enlivens my participants, which is closely related to the notion of phantasm.

I observed that my participants' engagement with games of chance is a blend of nostalgia for the past and speculation about the future, crafting a vision of what might be achieved through luck. They adeptly weave together moments of play infused with vitality, continually refreshing their aspirations to navigate economic hardships and uncertainties. I argue that 'survivance', serving as an analytical lens for understanding my participants' pursuit of luck, carries dual significance. First, it stands as an affirmation of their existence and continuity of life, actively pursued through the quest for luck and participation in games, a sentiment strongly emphasised by the participants themselves. Secondly, it encompasses a realm of objects, concepts, narratives, beliefs, and materials inherited from the past—such as symbols of luck, tales about the lucky dealers, and associated sayings and symbols—that persist and are utilised in present times, embodying a quality of 'survivance' (Derrida 2011; Vizenor 2008). My participants persistently renewed their hope for a future win. They engage in games of chance as a means to nurture hope amidst uncertainties, envisioning alternatives as a way to endure life challenges.



Figure 4 – Image of one of the scratch cards that Mert purchased thrown away on the ground

Conclusion

On living
Living is no laughing matter
I mean, you must take living so seriously
that even at seventy, for example, you'll plant olive trees—
and not for your children, either,
but because although you fear death you don't believe it,
because living, I mean, weighs heavier

Nâzım Hikmet – February 1948¹⁸

This poem was written by the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet who wrote it during his time in prison. Despite being a political prisoner who had to flee his homeland for most of his life, Hikmet thought that the act of living, with all its intensity, cruelty, and misfortune, outweighs the constant fear of annihilation and death that humans face. To live seriously is to maintain an interest in life and be engaged in the vitality of living. Survivance is about the act of living. Dreams, hopes, and imaginations of a better life bind people to the act of living, which is

¹⁸ Translated by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1994). See the translated poem in full in the poet's archive at <https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/nazim/onliving.html>

‘serious and no laughing matter’. My participants’ engagement with games of chance, however, is situated alongside their everyday laborious realities, intimately linked to their experiences of the Turkish economic crisis and contingency of life. Despite the absence of luck in their precarious lives, my participants hoped that luck would eventually materialise and favour them. Their involvement in numerical games of chance was described as a quest to discover fortune and find luck, rather than mere gambling. The elements of play, marked by vitality and anticipation, were evident in how they employed their imagination and hopeful thoughts during their engagement with numerical chance games.

The mere possibility of the presence of luck (Hage 2020), amplified the thought of ‘What if I win?!’, which motivated them to chase the phantasm of luck. In addition to feeling excited, my participants frequently mentioned being nostalgic about family gatherings around the New Year’s Lottery draw and related their pursuit of luck to the stories of old Turkish movies in the 1970s and 80s featuring stories of lotteries and becoming rich overnight. Cartoonish and childish advertising capitalises on the nostalgic memories of the younger generation, indicating that the lottery is a joyful and innocent form of entertainment. Participation in lotteries in Turkey serves as both a social and individual endeavour that was initiated to contribute to national causes, such as the establishment of the Turkish Pilot Association.

My participants’ experiences challenge the widely held belief that engaging in games of chance is an act of escape, despite the fact that their engagement may not always appear constructive or positive. Additionally, each type of game of chance or commercial gambling has its own dynamics and attracts different individuals who seek different affective states from their engagement with the game. Some seek escape, whereas others seek vitality and presence. Their involvement in games of chance aims to establish a sense of presence by incorporating play and envisioning luck as a means of reclaiming the time spent in demanding work settings (Hammering 2022). Rather than emphasising the loss of control or self-liquidation (Schüll 2012), their objective was to use games as a tool for coping with laborious conditions. Lastly, this article underscores the importance of recognising a context-specific approach to comprehend different modes of participation in games of chance and their impact on individuals to understand the embeddedness of different economic activities (Polanyi, 1977) and the intricate motivations behind lottery participation, influenced by social, cultural, and emotional aspects.

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