

# Moving East: Explaining Aspects of Nigerian Trade to China

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## Abstract

This paper highlights the shortcoming in explanations offered for the movement of African transnational trade to China, drawing from secondary multidisciplinary scholarship on the history, settlement, and cross-border trade migration in Africa, with an emphasis on Nigeria suggesting that the eastward migration of African transnational traders is part of a larger socio-historical continuity and social change process in Africa. The work also posits that the move to China is an experientially cultivated industry that is increasingly changing from a local space to a global space.

**Keywords:** China-Africa; development; trade Diaspora; south-south migration; transnationalism

## Introduction

Since the end of formal colonialism in Africa, 'development process' has been influenced by a gamut of ideas, from nationalisation and privatisation to institutional strengthening and now sustainable development. Throughout, foreign actors have played a key role in defining, shaping and directing these processes, with foreign players from the West dominating for most of post-independence period. Beginning on a large scale around early 2000s, China entered the development scene of Africa. Between 2000 and 2005, China-Africa trade rose from \$10 billion to \$25 billion (Alden, 2005).

Also, China's share of exports from Africa increased from 3% in 1998 to 15% in 2008, and has since surpassed the United States as Africa's largest trading partner (Besada & O'Bright; Songwe & Moyo, 2012). More than any other foreign country in recent history, China has been very aggressive in establishing itself as a critical development player on the continent. Through not-so-discriminate trade relations, investments in extractive and construction sectors, aid and technical assistance, doubts about China's role in the present and future development processes of Africa is now fast disappearing.

Apart from the flows of goods and capital (Adebayo, 2015), however, China-Africa interaction is producing a large in- and out-flows of people, many of who engage in transnational trade (Bodomo, 2010; Politzer, 2008). As a major feature of China's participation in contemporary development process of Africa, transnational traders of African origins are moving in both directions to acquire and distribute large volumes of consumer and industrial goods in local markets. A number of empirical investigations have been carried out to describe the activities of these transnational African traders in China (*see* Bertonecello, Bredeloup, & Oates, 2007; Bodomo, 2010; Bredeloup, 2012; Lyons, Brown, & Li, 2012, 2013; Mathews, 2007; Mathews & Yang, 2012). These African traders, argues Mohan and Lampert (2013), are active at different levels to negotiate, shape and drive Chinese presence on the continent.

As with other forms of population flow that transform the societies of destination, African eastward migration is creating a new migration reality in China and transforming her public space, especially in big cities in South China (Pieke, 2011). Correspondingly, this flow is attracting a lot of attention from scholars, most of whom partake in writing contemporary African diaspora 'history' in Asia, even if only tangentially, with little or no contribution from African researchers<sup>1</sup>. The aim of this paper is to analyse critically the dominant explanations for the movement of African transnational traders to China. Based on critical reading of the growing 'Africans in China' literature, the paper challenges the socio-historical basis of prevailing narratives about African trade migrations to China. Although these narratives highlight the critical factors that drive African mobilities to China, the paper contends that the explanation is incomplete without accounting for the long history of cross-border trading across the continent, thus making the movement an aspect of socio-historical continuity and social change process in post-colonial Africa.

## **China-Africa Relations and Trade Migration**

Although interaction between China and Africa became regular only in the second half of the 20th century, direct contact dates as far back as the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) (Anshan, 2005). After the Bandung Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, the China connected with many African countries by signing series of agreements and maintaining friendly ties. As China-Africa relations evolved, China was assisted to secure a permanent sit on the UN (United Nations) Security Council while African governments received aids and economic and educational assistance worth billions of dollars (Cheng & Shi, 2009; Sautman & Hairong, 2007).

During the 1980s through the 1990s, the relationship was solidified with the so-called South-South agenda and various anti-hegemonic discourse that Beijing pursued in Africa. By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, China has emerged as Africa's largest trading partner (Besada & O'Bright, 2017).

An important consequence of the relationship is the rapidity of flows to and from both continents. At present, statistics about the exact population of Africans in China is not available. Existing 'guesstimate' (Bodomo & Pajancic, 2015) suggests that the population of Africans in China may be as high as hundreds of thousands. In Guangzhou alone, one report claims that around 200,000 African migrants live in the city (The Nanfang Insider, 2015). Many of these migrants are there to trade, unlike African migrants in the Global North who travelled to Europe and America to fill labour gaps (Akyeampong, 2000; Reynolds, 2002). Many Africans who stay back after graduating from Chinese universities also end up conducting China-Africa business (Bredeloup, 2014; Haugen, 2013; Sautman & Hairong, 2007).

Although the China-Africa trade corridor only began to attract attention around the 2000s, African traders were already entering China by the 1980s. As Bertonecelo and Bredeloup (2007) contended, older and more discreet dynamics emerged as early as the mid-1980s in response to market instability in Asia and China's economic rise. These traders anticipated change and rapidly expanded their networks by appropriating new nodes. Two economic logics informed the decision of these early callers. On the one hand, explains Bertonecelo and Bredeloup (2007), Africans trading in precious stones in Asian countries that neighboured China wanted to expand their networks and diversify into other lines of business. Since most of the merchandise traded were smuggled, Africans began to explore safer markets and new business opportunities, both of which mainland China guaranteed. The financial crises that spread throughout Southeast Asia eventually made a move into China inevitable. On the other hand, continues Bertonecelo and Bredeloup (2007), the introduction of direct flight services in major African cities to enhance exportation of Chinese manufactured product into Africa, which was hitherto transhipped through Dubai, constituted a further incentive that encouraged African businessmen to move into China.

Thus, China-Africa relation resulted in new mobility of goods, capital, and people, and led to the emergence of trade relations with distinctly informal and grassroots character (Schapendonk, 2013). Due to the participation of many people from the lower rung of the society, some scholars called the trade an instance of globalisation from below (Lan & Xiao, 2014; Mathews & Yang, 2012). However, apart from trade, these African migrants are major contributors to the growing diversity of immigrant population in China (Li, Lyons, & Brown, 2012; Li, Xue, Lyons, & Brown, 2008; Pieke, 2011). Attracted mainly by China's economic success and opportunities, the immigrants are forming more permanent communities, living in clustered settlements and engaging in specialised occupations (Castillo, 2014; Li et al., 2012; Pieke, 2011).

In making sense of the trajectory of participation of Africans in China-Africa trade, we must be attentive to the facilitation and reinforcement roles of the Chinese state and the unique position it occupies in contemporary economic system (Adebayo, 2015). But more worthy of recognition is the special and strategic way that China's globalism targeted the African continent as a means of consolidating her status in the world capitalist regime (Brautigam, 2008; Johnson, 2014). Yet, the influx of African trade migrants into Chinese society is not entirely the product of China's efforts. Assuming that this is the case, as currently done in most of the extant narratives, perhaps unintentionally, is to ignore the significance of Africa's internal socio-historical processes, as well as the specific agentic forces within the continent, that condition and drive the intensification of trade migration of Africans to China.

### **Trading Past and Contemporary: Dispersal of African Traders to China**

Maintaining a posture that recognises the role of 'what was' in making sense of what is unfolding regarding the formation of new African trade diasporas is crucial. Historical hindsight enriches the analysis being undertaken and positions the analyst to properly gauge the extent of agency of particular trading group in the evolution of itself and in the establishment of itself 'as is.' The significance of being cognisant of the different phases in the evolutionary process of contemporary trade diasporas was implied by Kyle (1999, p. 426) in the case of Otavalo trade diaspora and by Riccio when he studied Mouride traders in Italy. Riccio specially notes that:

It is by transferring a long-standing commercial economy...and some of the organizational features that developed through internal migration (the dahira, for instance) that have enabled Senegalese migrants to shape the contemporary transnational community... For the Wolof, transnational social formations were already partially in the making when they first encountered the Italian receiving context. (Riccio, 2003, p. 99)

Similarly, Nwosu (1973) emphasise that:

...the trading instinct is strong in many Africans. Even where markets were absent, Africans were not lacking in what might be called a value-sense in exchanges. It is this value-sense which...will facilitate the adjustment to the modern situation in which specialization in trade within the context of a growing pecuniary and more sophisticated system is gradually taking place. (Nwosu, 1973, p. 473).

Therefore, linking Africa's trading past, and how it has transformed through pre- and post-independence period to its present formation beyond the continent is germane.

Long-distance trade played a major role in the history of Africa. According to Curtin (1984), the trade communities formed by African traders offer the best evidence for understanding how trade diasporas worked in the past. From the 14th century, trans-Saharan trade, built around ethnicity and held together by kinship relations, had already developed in West Africa (Macgaffey, 2003). Prior to the introduction of camel in the second century AD, the promises of wealth from gold ensured that traders travelled through the Libyan desert using horses and carts, and the trade contributed to the formation of states such as Niger and the Maghreb, as well as to the founding of towns like Algiers and Oran (Stoller, 2002). Many transit markets existed along trade routes, and they involve practices such as protection payments and plundering. These markets also implicate interests that crisscross with inter-boundary politics, culture and local economy (Curtin, 1984).

The Nande of Kivu in eastern DRC, Mouride of Senegalese, Soninke of Ghana, the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo of present day Nigeria amongst many other groups established trade settlements and operated through trade networks that connected many locations. Sharp variation in ecological conditions, between forest and savanna regions to the coast, meant that different areas were interdependent, thus demanding constant movement and exchanges of goods across vast geographical locations and socio-ethnic lines. Stoller (2002) further observes that the limitations of local commerce, which consisted primarily of household economics, propelled cross-border trade in Africa, leading over time to the establishment of networks of trade routes that connected consumers in lands that were dispersed geographically. These early trades were characterised by competition although occupational solidarity was common among pre-colonial African merchants (Curtin, 1984).

In the past, traditional institutions and structures featured in the conduct of trading activities. According to Hopkins (1973, as cited in Stoller, 2002), four groups of people were engaged in West African long-distance trade in the early years: the occasional traders (or target traders) who sometimes make dry-season trips to trade in specific goods in order to raise money for specific purposes; the specialists, such as smiths and tobacco and cotton farmers, whose commerce developed from their specific productive activities; professional traders with elaborate trading networks tied to kinship or patron-client relations; and lastly there were the official traders who represented the interest of the state. The most significant of these groups was the professional traders. Rulers were also involved as they kept in touch with important merchants as commercial policy formed large part of state policy as a whole (Stoller, 2002).

Religion played a unifying role in early long-distance trade in Africa. Islam in particular contributed to the organisation and functioning of trade settlements across West Africa. The belief in the oneness of all adherents of the Islamic faith gave commercial advantages to Muslim traders. Hausa settlements known as *Zongo* were open to all Muslim traders irrespective of the location of the settlement in question. Relatedly, Soninke merchants operating on the edge of the desert adopted the faith of desert traders not only because they thought it was spiritually advantageous but also due to the fact that it was commercially beneficial (Curtin, 1984).

The foundation of the demise of the old African trade diasporas was laid by colonialism. The restructuring of production structure, from exchange based on needs of close and distant territories to one based on externally oriented production of primary commodities, ensured that incentives to trade within would gradually disappear. Specifically, the freehand and powers of monopoly that some colonial administrations granted to 'auxiliary diasporas,'<sup>2</sup> especially Indians, Chinese and Lebanese, rendered pre-colonial African trade diasporas less competitive. In addition to immobilising African traders and restricting their productive capacity to regional migrant labour, colonialism forced the decline of old African trade diasporas with boundary re-making process and expatriate competition (Akyeampong, 2010).

By the 1980s, trading among Africans in the south of the Sahara Desert had taken an intercontinental turn. Whereas historical precondition of culture of long-distance trading had prepared Africans for this change, the social pressure of the 1980s, caused by economic and political maladjustments that began with militaristic predation and imposition of neo-liberal policies on African countries, was most profound in the dispersal of African traders in post-colonial period (Adepoju, 2000; Akanle, 2011; Nnaemeka, 2007).

Before the imposition of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), the economies of many states in Africa were either failing or collapse-ready. Almost all the new resource-dependent states were facing economic crises, following drastic fall of commodity prices at the global market. From Kenya to Malawi and Ghana, small farm-holders and households that depended on lands for income lost their source of survival to series of land reforms embarked upon by Africa's new political elites (Chinsinga, 2004). When the IMF-World Bank-sponsored policy of adjustment was finally deployed, survival for millions increasingly depend on 'moving,' first into urban centres, then to neighbouring African countries and eventually outside the continent. It is worthy of note that during this period, understanding about the impact of SAP on the formation of new African trade diasporas was overshadowed by a preponderance of diasporic subjects such as political escapees, asylum seekers, scholars and professionals. Nevertheless, apart from the poor and desperate economic migrants that moved, some of whom later became transnational traders (Akyeampong, 2000), experienced African traders also moved (Buggenhagen, 2003; Zeleza, 2008).



For most of Africa, a major fallout of the imposition of neo-liberal policy in the 1980s is the rise of neo-liberal import and export trade. The new economic order, based on *Tokunbo* or second-hand economic structure (Omobowale, 2013), distributed African bodies into capitalist countries. Early post-colonial participants were entrepreneurs that craved transnationalism and were motivated by capital and profit. They aimed to link local and global spaces through accumulation (Adebayo, 2015). Leveraging on new economic internationalism that favoured manufacturers in Western countries, these traders satisfied increasing domestic demand for things 'foreign' (or Western) and trendy (including sub-standard ICT products) by importing aggressively and maintaining strong distribution networks that linked Africa to nodes in America, Europe and Asia (Adebayo, 2015; Omobowale, 2012, 2013).

Ordinary Africans who sought freedom from economic hardship explored opportunities outside the continent, using legal and illegal means. For example, the high and increasing presence of Congolese traders in European countries was associated with policy failures and economic declines of the mid-1970s to 1990s. The movement *la Sape* (*Societe des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elegantes*), which facilitated the migration and stabilised networks of chain migration of Congolese to France, was started by unemployed youth in Brazzaville in the mid-1970s (Macgaffey, 2005). The youths engaged in both legal and illegal trades, from smuggling of precious stones and drugs to clothing, electronics and local Congolese food. Similar result followed in Senegal after the government ceased to protect domestic manufactured goods from foreign competition in 1986 (Macgaffey, 2005).

As African trade diaspora become increasingly cross-continental, there were noticeable elements of change and continuity. The first major change is that solidarity based on ethnic linkages has become more fluid and open. In a way, contemporary engagement in trade beyond the continent has placed different aspects of identity in confrontation. As shown in the case of Mouride traders in Italy, religious and ethnic differences that served essential solidarity functions are no longer enough (Riccio, 2003). The constitution of distinct ethnic groups into formal states since the 1960s is a significant factor in this change. New social, political, economic and cultural realities that were implicated within postcolonial boundaries, from local, state, and regional to continental levels, made identity and identifications fluid and infinitely complex. African traders outside their homelands were evolving hierarchies of identities and drawing upon them according to the dictates of varied social contexts. The second change, however, is that many African transnational traders are operating on the margin of the law. As a result of increasing migration restrictions imposed on Africans, some trader from the continent are evading visa regulations and taxes as they moved out to participate in international economy (Bodomo, 2015; Macgaffey, 2005; Mathews, 2015).

On the other hand, scholars observe that some continuities exist. According to Macgaffey (2003), the late 20th century African trade diasporas have managed to preserve old trading practices and forms of knowledge as they incorporated into the world economy. Even though the problems they sought to solve have changed in present times, they still are remarkably similar to those of earlier centuries. In cities where they have huge numerical presence, African migrant traders continue to live in special neighbourhoods and maintain exclusiveness through celebrations, eating habits, leisure and religious practices (Bodomo & Ma, 2012; Li et al., 2008; Macgaffey, 2005).

## **Nigerian Migration and Contemporary African Trade Diaspora Formations**

Through centuries of economic exchanges undertaken by groups making up Nigeria today, the Nigerians have always been implicated in long-distance trade. In a sense, trade is the first most important activity that linked the diverse communities in pre-colonial times, after which internecine and inter-group wars, banditry, slavery, colonialism and colonial amalgamation solidified the link.

Scholarly works exist on the trading activities of groups in Nigeria, especially the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba people. Perhaps because of the level of coordination within the diaspora settlements they formed and the far-reaching networks they established throughout the West African region and beyond, the Hausa traders are about the most studied among these groups.

Abner Cohen's 1969 *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa* is the most comprehensive anthropological study on Hausa traders and their diasporic settlement. The study described how Hausa trade spawned well-organised diaspora settlements that operated through centralised authority and strategically guided customs, affective affiliations and networks that connect multiple nodes across alien lands with core economic and cultural centres in the heartland of the Hausa society. Hausa traders were a dominant group in kola nut trade that reached the Volta basin (Lovejoy, 1973). The Kambarin Beriberi kola traders operated along trade routes across the West African region and managed caravans to Asante in the 1890s to 1900s. Hausa trade settlements known as *Zongo* were expansive, established in Ghana, Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso. 'Once the Hausa had established trading enclaves in larger towns, they began to settle in smaller towns, creating a far-reaching trading network along which goods and money flowed without obstruction' (Stoller, 2002, p. 30).

Central to the success of early Hausa trade and the diaspora settlements they found was the existence of shared custom among the traders. Hausa customs and institutions provided the structure within which trading was organised efficiently while also allowing community members to claim identity exclusivity and dominate north-south kola and cattle trades at the heart of a Yoruba city.



Meanwhile, the cultures and system of social relations exhibited by Hausa traders in diaspora was not a replica of what was in place in Hausaland. Rather, the settled traders living in quarters were creative in the process of identity formation such that northerners who were not typically Hausa came to adopt *Hausaness* by acquiring Hausa language, inter-marrying and embracing a unique version of Islam (A. Cohen, 1969). Today, Hausa trade diaspora continues to thrive, extending from Nigeria to Lomé, Abidjan, Dakar, Paris, and now New York City, though not as close-knit and organised as before (Stoller, 2002).

Likewise, the Igbo of Nigeria are in popular image synonymous with trade both within and outside their homelands. Trading for the 'Igboman' and 'Igbowoman' is an economic activity whose roots extend beyond history and existential conditioning to interweave an entire culture of individualism and communal egalitarianism. The saying *Uwa bu ahia*, meaning literally, 'the world is a marketplace', better captures this point. Among the Igbo, the market is both the centre of economic and social life (Agozino & Anyanike, 2007). Morrill (1963) argues that the market is an institution around which loyalty to different villages cluster.

In Igboland, sheer survival needs forced people to embark on trading ventures that linked sparsely located villages and towns. Particularly, shortage of farmable lands and high population density were critical factors that led to the dispersal of the traders in the early periods.

The trading activities of the Aro people, a sub-ethnic of Igbo collective, was documented by Curtin (1984). The Aro were distinguished by their own Igbo dialect, special and separate network of kinship ties. The group was also distinct by religious prestige centred on *Ibinukpabi*, an oracle located near the main Aro town, Arochuku, but visited and respected by people from all of Igboland. Their connection to an oracle whose area of respect cover many communities in Igboland gave their trading a force of spiritual authority. The Aro were important traders, with commercial settlements throughout the rest of Igbo-speaking territory and eastward through Ibibio land and toward the Cameroon highlands (Curtin, 1984).

Like their Hausa counterparts, Aro traders were also innovative in their construction of identity. Individual formed artificial bond of kinship with non-Aro Igbo and created a form of imagined blood brotherhood that aided coping processes in areas where Aro people did not reside permanently. They were organised into trading groups and move about in troop-like fashion. Yet, while admitting that many Igbo people travelled far and wide, Uduku (2002) was quick to mention that much evidence does not exist to suggest that substantial Igbo trading communities, or any other kinds of settlement, were established. He explains that it was not until about the 1920s that Igbo made their presence felt amongst the Yoruba and Hausa. During colonial period, Igbo traders flocked into urban centres all over Nigeria. Younger Igbo were pushed outward into urban centres because of factors such as shortage of land, caste system that limited rights to land ownership and because many families were not wealthy enough to pay customary bride price for traditional marriages (Morrill, 1963; van den Bersselaar, 2005).

Meanwhile, the view of the world as marketplace serves another purpose other than predisposing Igbo to trade. As Agozino and Anyanike (2007, p. 333) explain:

When the Igbo say that the world is a market, they usually complete the sentence by observing that when one buys to one's content, one goes home. The home referred to here is the land of the ancestors to which the Igbo believe the spirits of the dead return to bargain for a better life in their next incarnation.

The belief in eventual return to ancestral homeland shaped the diasporic life of Igbo traders in many ways. Wherever they settled, Igbo immigrants, including those who trade among them, establish hometown associations through which they remain connected with co-ethnics and their villages and towns in Igboland. Conversely, this same attachment to the homeland makes permanent settlement at destination difficult.

Yoruba too had a highly active market system across Yorubaland that facilitated trade for many centuries. In Ijebu and Egba kingdoms, special market chiefs, the *Parakoyi*, maintained order and collected tolls and duties from traders (Olutayo, 2005). The trades were organised along long distances, covering zones between forest and savanna regions, from Ilaro to Eruwa then moving northward towards Ogbomoso and Ilorin where products were exchanged.

Further, geographically dispersed agricultural and fish farmers were linked by long-distance trade exchanges that connected the coastal people with the interior. Unlike the Hausa trade that was dominated by males (A. Cohen, 1969), long-distance trade among Yoruba was dominated by women (Olutayo, 2005). An interesting aspect of the involvement of women in Yoruba long-distance trade was that both women of ordinary and royal births participated, an arrangement that contrast sharply with the structure of early trade in Greece and many Asian kingdoms where trading was viewed as unworthy of royals (R. Cohen, 1997; Curtin, 1984).

The foregoing accounts imply that Nigerians, just as other trading peoples across Africa, are opportunity seekers. Regardless of the group involved, Africans participated in trade that transcends immediate social and political boundaries. This culture of migratory trade is an enduring practice that both exists and persists through the changing social circumstances of the people, and transformation in local and global economic structures (Adebayo, 2015).

## **Towards A Comprehensive Migration Narrative**

In contemporary era, Nigerian traders have responded to local demands for trendy, yet unaffordable, modern merchandise by linking up with an emerging powerhouse in the capitalist world economy. In the context of postcolonial obliteration of successful cross-border traders of the past, the capability of the new economic powerhouses to produce cheaply and make alternatives accessible (e.g. China or *chinco* phones, computers, fabrics, rechargeable lamps etc.) provided opportunities for Nigerians with longstanding trading-orientation to get back in and thrive (Adebayo, 2015; Omobowale, 2013).

Within the context of China-Africa migrations, Nigerian traders in China are replicating what Curtin's (1984) referred to as cross-cultural trades in contemporary form. Apart from the differences of language, which made identification with co-ethnics/national an important aspect living and trading in China, they are also reproducing old practices by serving as intermediary between local Chinese producers and transient traders from Africa (Bertoncello et al., 2007; Bredeloup, 2012). Further research can reveal how much of the past are being reproduced or transformed – as different from what is new or distinctly characteristic of contemporary trade diaspora. For the present undertaking, the point to note is that linking the trading past of Nigerians, and other Africans, to their participation in recent transnational trade to China offers a much stronger approach for constructing a comprehensive and coherent migration narrative.

No doubt, the trading past of societies remains a strong motivation for continuing participation of Africans in transnational trade. Accordingly, the China-Africa trade corridor is a co-constituted socio-economic space whose production relies on interacting forces that emanate from and persist in both Chinese and African societies. This paper contends that the narratives of African migrations to China must incorporate the long history of cross-border trade in Africa. This holds greater promise for writing a more comprehensive contemporary African migration stories.

Indeed, a historically aware analysis has the benefit of connecting past endeavours with present ventures in a single socio-historical process that is continuously in the making. As such, historical continuity matters in making sense of contemporary participation of Nigerians/Africans in transnational trade – including those involving a move into China.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Adams Bodom is the *only* African researcher that has published *consistently* on ‘Africans in China. Daouda Cissé is another interesting contributor to the discourse (Cissé, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Auxiliary diasporas composed of ethnically-different camp-followers of military conquest or minorities permitted or encouraged and given freehand by colonial regimes to engage in economic activities in colonised territories (R. Cohen, 1997).

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