

The Scramble for Nigeria: The View from Kano

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The end of 2011 offered an opportunity to build upon ongoing research for my honor's thesis in History, travel to Africa for the first time, and meet new people from a historically rich culture. The history of Nigeria, in particular northern Nigeria, includes the extensive reach of local markets in regional and international trade. For that reason, the industrial manufacturing and trade economy of Kano has become a focal point for the influx of Chinese products, workers, and investment. During the 2011-12 winter break I spent two weeks in Kano with my history honor's thesis advisor and CAS joint faculty Dr. Susan O'Brien, using funds from my University Scholar Award to conduct oral history and ethnographic research about the impact of the Chinese presence on the local economy.

For over six decades, China has established and developed a strong economic and diplomatic presence on the African continent. What began as a mutual relationship framed under the pretense of shared history and values, bolstered with developmental aid by the Chinese, has developed into trade imbalances with an influx of Chinese products that flood local markets. Herein lies the dilemma, and thus the motive for this research. While some scholars argue that the Chinese are providing products and aid necessary for economic growth on the continent, others see the increasing Chinese presence as a 'New Scramble' for African resources.

Northern Nigeria provided an ideal location to explore the impact of the increasing Chinese presence. Due to Dr. O'Brien's extensive connections in Kano, I had the opportunity to interview individuals from academia, business, the marketplace, and government, and to gain their perspectives on the impact of Chinese trade and manufacturing. Their viewpoints, although diverse, echoed a common theme: the people of Kano desire economic development and welcome foreign trade. However, the illegal reproduction of local products, the influx of cheap manufactured goods, and the lack of enforceable government policies against Chinese economic improprieties (such as smuggling and the sale of counterfeit goods) have contributed to rampant unemployment and the decline of a once vibrant manufacturing industry.

While local business owners and marketers



believe trade with China can benefit their community, they still long for policies that encourage local entrepreneurship and mutually beneficial trade with Chinese companies. The Chinese are not to blame for all of Kano and Nigeria's economic woes - as many of my interviewees made clear, the Nigerian government needs to implement structural changes: providing basic infrastructure (such as a reliable source of electricity) and developing sound economic and financial policies. Yet the Chinese presence has contributed, some believe, to the economic woes of the nation.

This trip provided me an opportunity to expand my international viewpoint. The incredible hospitality of the citizens of Kano, in particular the staff at the University Guest House of Bayero University, proved that the future of this great land remains bright, as long as the right leaders can implement effective policies. This research also opened the door for potential partnerships between Bayero University, Kano and the UF Center for African Studies. Fortuitously, on the day we walked through the office door of business professor Dr. Murtala S. Sagagi, he was actively looking for an appropriate American university to partner

with in promoting social entrepreneurship in Kano. When we handed him the CIBER-generated Sub-Saharan Africa Business Environment Report (co-written by Dr. Anita Spring), he felt that fate had arranged our meeting! Subsequently we enjoyed an exciting two hours of dialogue about the Chinese presence in Nigeria, the differences between the Chinese and the much older community of Lebanese traders and manufacturers in Kano, and the future of economic development in northern Nigeria. Funded by the US Embassy in Abuja, Dr. Sagagi visited UF for a week in April, 2012, presenting a public lecture at CAS, visiting several African history classes as a guest speaker, and meeting with faculty across a wide spectrum of disciplines to imagine and begin to design possible collaborations between the two institutions.

Xavier Monroe is a senior double-majoring in civil engineering & history. He is recipient of a University Scholar Award and a Ronald E. McNair Scholarship. He has presented his research at a number of venues in 2012, including the UF History Honors Conference and the McNair Scholars Research Conference in Atlanta.