



Nokoko

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# Two Cities

Guangzhou / Lagos

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I was in Nigeria in May, the year I turned twenty-nine. And aside from the few hours of electricity per day, the way most of the food twisted my stomach or burned my tongue, and that the terrible stifling heat made life difficult at times, I was excited to be exactly where I needed to be: Lagos. Once the political center of Nigeria, it is still reigning as the financial and economic capital. And from what I saw, it was a thriving, bustling, chaotic metropolis where swindling police officers, savvy market women, racing okadas, and the occasional goat shared the streets with everyday Lagosians.



Picture 1: Lagos: Women passing along Mile 12 Market in Ketu where one can buy household goods, reusable items, and general foodstuff such as yams, goat, dried fish, pepper, and tomatoes brought in from around the country.

I was pursuing the second leg of a research project devoted to examining the everyday lives of Yoruba traders I had met in Guangzhou. In 2009, a series of news reports shifted focus to a sizable West African trading community in southeastern China following a protest by an approximated two hundred African men in front of a police station that drew a crowd and shut down traffic. The protest was in response to earlier events in which an immigration raid staged by Chinese police in a clothing mall frequented primarily by Nigerian traders led to at least two reported injuries, one critical.



Picture 2: Guangzhou: Chinese soldiers leaving the Guangzhou train station.

The incidents were examples of the growing tension between Chinese authorities who claimed to be simply doing their job—rounding up and expelling illegals without valid passports or visas—and African traders who felt profiled, discriminated against, and harassed. I went with my camera in hopes of capturing some of these moments but ended up coming away with many more complex images of casual, even friendly interactions. At the very center were the men and women who made the long journey east, following the flow of new money and sellable goods from Lagos to China. And in the end, it only made sense that I continue on with the project in Nigeria where most of the goods ended up.



Picture 3: Guangzhou: Yoruba trader passing a Chinese man transporting goods on Guangyuanxi Road.

The camera followed me to Lagos and I made sure to photograph what I saw as Nigerian everyday life. Chasing after a man riding an okada with a goat draped across his lap as an example of efficient livestock transportation and capturing the hand painted images on a wood signboard that advertised the precise cut and appearance of frozen chicken and fish alongside a dignified portrait of the shop's owner. I even managed to photograph personal scenes: a woman brushing her teeth outside of her compound, two boys play fighting with long sticks in a private world of their own.



Picture 4: Lagos: A Chinese restaurant owner flanked by a Nigerian waiter in a restaurant in Ojota's Chinese Shopping Complex. Inaugurated in 2005 by former first lady, Stella Obasanjo, the complex which resembles a cross between a European fortress and a large Chinese courtyard compound is now a faded pink color with a mix of occupied and empty storefronts.

I was also schooled in Nigerian Life 101. I watched as black skinned catfish were transformed into a deep red pepper and tomato stew. I curtsied when introduced to a father-in-law, uncles, and aunts. I politely picked up the tab every time a few of us walked down the dirt road to buy something from the provisions seller who kept milk, juice, and beer in a Chinese manufactured freezer powered by a small generator. And I learned to trust Tmony, the trader I had followed from China to Lagos who held a cellular phone steady and illuminated the walls in rooms lightless as the deepest parts of the ocean.



Picture 5: Guangzhou: A man talks on his cell phone in front of Lotus Market near the Sanyuanli Metro Station. The cell phone, an indispensable tool in China, connects traders with family, potential buyers, sellers, agents, and associates who can quickly send updates about a party or an alert that a police raid is in progress.

He knew that I had wanted answers and invited me to Nigeria to “see everything”—from his large extended family and childhood home in Ilasamaja to the corruption and lack of jobs that made it nearly impossible to thrive honestly in a country known for fraud.



Picture 6: Lagos: A man transports a goat by okada.

The latter predicament was what led many Lagosian youth, disillusioned with the long promise of a bright future, to go abroad. Every week it seemed like another one of Tmony's friends, associates, neighbors, or schoolmates had "traveled down." They were in India, China, Malaysia, Egypt, and Dubai armed with student visas, work visas, or tourist visas. Unafraid of the risks and open to the wildest of encounters, these were contemporary explorers riding headfirst into a new global economy.





Picture 7: Lagos: Customers queue at the bakery counter in Shoprite, an African chain supermarket on Victoria Island.

At least that's how it felt for many of the men I encountered who had little to no experience in business or travel. When first arriving to China, Tmony had the equivalent of a high school education and had last worked as a machine operator in a Lebanese-owned biscuit factory. He would study briefly in Qinghai before finding his way to Guangzhou after his student visa expired, joining the rest of the undocumented men and women involved in trade.





Picture 8: Lagos: Schoolchildren passing on a street in Ogba.

The same year that the protest took place there had been reports that claimed there were approximately 20,000 Africans in China's southern coastal province of Guangdong although many speculated that the total number was actually higher due to the large number of undocumented persons living there (Osnos, 2009). Nigerians made up the largest population of those Africans and comprised an extensive network of buyers, seller, and entrepreneurs. Their constant movement between two cities with the fastest growing economies in Asia and Africa was nothing short of fascinating to me, a recent Ph.D. graduate who had spent six years fixating over historical racial situations in the United States.



Picture 9: Lagos: Roadside shoe seller. Many sellers in Lagos receive their merchandise directly from Guangzhou. The merchandise is then sold at a higher price with the cost of shipping and taxes factored in.

Prior to beginning this project, I had done some reading on China's multiple investments in Africa and had even considered claims that China was increasingly engaged in neocolonialism on the continent. However, seeing Africans in China was seeing a different side of the global machine in motion.



Picture 10: Lagos: A Mobile Policeman (MOPOL) relaxes between two men under the shade of a tree on a busy street.

I had so many questions and saw this as a once in a lifetime opportunity to sort out some of the anxieties I had about race, borders, and the bodies of my parents—one black and one Chinese. I assumed that many African traders would have had to interpret and negotiate these same themes and embarked on my journey to encounter these new global citizens.



Picture 11: Guangzhou: Two traders catch a lift on a three-wheeled motorized taxi on Guangyuanxi Road.

I had arrived during the holiday season and Christmas decorations were everywhere in Guangzhou. Tmony introduced me to small community of Yoruba traders and many were in high spirits despite not being in Lagos to spend time with family and friends. The majority of the men were in their mid-twenties or early thirties.



Picture 12: Guangzhou: Two Yoruba traders take a night stroll.

They dressed well in either business casual attire or fashions that looked as if they were lifted from the adverts in a hip hop magazine. If they were married back home, I couldn't tell as most kept an African or local Chinese woman as a girlfriend. And when it came time to asking questions, most answered openly after first greeting me politely.



Picture 13: Guangzhou: Woman and children passing on Guangyuanxi Road. This is the main thoroughfare where hotels, wholesale markets, barbershops, and export and shipping agents catering to Nigerian clients can be found.

It actually seemed quite easy to get “linked in” to the trading network in Guangzhou. Not seen were the large debts or underlying stress that the traders carried. From the very beginning, men and women are expected to pay exorbitant fees to agents, employees in the consulate, and informal lenders in Lagos in order to obtain a way into China.



Picture 14: Guangzhou: A man passes by a police vehicle on Sunday morning. In 2009, it was estimated that twenty thousand Africans were living in Guangzhou; however that number remains unverified since a number of men and women continue to live there off the record—either with expired visas or without passports. Some of the Nigerians without passports had sold theirs to fellow countrymen who wanted to return home.

Once paid, the person would be given a name, a cell phone number, or a hotel room and address. Upon arrival in Guangzhou, that same person would place a call or take a taxi to the designated contact and the rest would be up to him. Of course, this all came with a price and you could never be sure who was really your friend but most of the traders usually became seasoned after their first few months or the second time being ripped off whichever came first. Several times Tmony had merchandise destroyed or stolen by customs officials, shipyard workers, or middle men who promised to personally deliver the goods to Lagos. But it was all still worth it.





Picture 15: Lagos: Men rest along the road at Mile 12 Market.

Tmony and most other traders each turned enough profit to continuously order shipments of goods to be sent to Nigeria while some had even gone on to start their own business working as barbers, restaurateurs, shipping agents, wholesalers, and consultants. A small number of women supplemented their income by braiding hair, selling food, and providing sexual services. And children, while few and far between, occasionally assisted their parents on shopping trips and provided the everyday joy. But there was a dark side to life as a trader.



Picture 16: Guangzhou: Men inside of a Yoruba owned barber shop in the Tong Tong Hotel. The hotel's staff would occasionally notify Nigerian patrons ahead of time if the police showed up looking for illegals. The men—both Igbos and Yorubas—come to the shop regularly, not only for a touch up but to socialize and hear about the latest news.

For the undocumented living in Guangzhou, the added burden of having to conceal one's status in order to prevent harassment, arrest, or jail time forced many men and women to operate within the peripheries. Tmony was one of those people. He explained that while he often relied on other traders to give the "all clear" via calls made to his cell phone, he usually avoided certain areas and ventured out only when it seemed safest. This meant we had to watch where we went and that it was up to me to book both our transportation arrangements and hotel rooms using my American passport as identification for the both of us.



Picture 17: Guangzhou: Chinese staff inside Bestway African Restaurant where an Igbo cook prepares such staples as pepper soup, egusi soup, and semo for a predominately Nigerian clientele.

In spite of this, Tmony remained eager to answer my questions and show me the everyday grind of traders living and working in Guangzhou. He introduced me to his personal shipping agent and barber. He maneuvered me past countless stalls in wholesale malls that sold everything from infrared goggles to sequined halter tops.



Picture 18: Yoruba man walks along side a Chinese woman in Ojota's Chinese Shopping Complex. In addition to restaurants and small shops selling clothing, textiles, shoes, and accessories imported from China, there are residential apartments in the complex with most of the tenants hailing from Mainland China.

He directed taxi cab drivers in pidginized Chinese phrases that I hadn't heard since girlhood. And we shared a meal of egusi soup and semo with another trader which was a change from the cheap meals they frequently had at McDonalds, KFC, or any of the myriad of cafeteria style fast food Chinese restaurants in Guangzhou.



Picture 19: Guangzhou: A Yoruba female trader carrying a home theater system in Dashatou. Accessible by bus, Dashatou is home to a large electronics bazaar where traders buy laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices in bulk.

It seemed oddly fitting that I was in China eating Nigerian food in the company of Yorubas who had picked up basic Chinese. Yet, I would see a similar kind of hybridity in the experiences of Chinese and Lebanese men and women in Lagos that following spring. For them, learning pidgin or any of the five hundred plus languages spoken in Nigeria as well as creating relationships with local people and adopting particular customs and social norms were essential to a smooth survival. Like the traders in Guangzhou, Chinese and Lebanese small business owners, contractors, and their spouses and children were grappling at the edges of a new cultural world where life was complex and required certain adaptations.



Picture 20: Guangzhou: Trader pricing shoes in Canaan Market. Canaan Market is the main wholesale market catering to Nigerian traders, known for selling garments, shoes, and accessories. However, some Chinese sellers have begun selling products targeting to African buyers: hair extensions and wigs and Chinese produced imitation wax and lace fabric.

One of those adaptations was being prepared for the possibility of change. For Tmony, this meant staying afloat amidst the daily cycle of births and deaths in Lagos after permanently returning there a month after we last saw each other in China. He had found a way to raise the money needed to pay off fines associated with his overstay and had bought a one-way plane ticket home. Since then, he had been selling what few goods his older brother in Sichuan Province could ship down. But with business being slow, he often found himself idle and thinking about traveling abroad again.



Picture 21: Guangzhou: Laborers take a break to eat lunch by the side of the road in Tienhe.

If anything, Tmony's experience reveals not only how fast money passes through the hand but how hungry Nigerian young people are for a taste of their own destiny; hungry enough to risk safety, leave the familiar, and live suspended between two cities, continents apart. I had gone to Guangzhou to see how capitalism was motivating ordinary African men and women to change the direction of their futures and left Lagos having witnessed the other side of the trade.





Picture 22: Lagos: Mile 12 Market.

It was, in fact, nothing short of inspiring: young people finding creative ways to become powerful, exercising their economic freedom beyond their wildest imaginations, and running ever so fiercely after the edge of their own dreams.



Picture 23: Guangzhou: Goods packed and ready to be shipped to Lagos.

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