Global African Trading Diasporas: Case Studies from China and Malaysia

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Abstract

For whichever purpose people move to another country, they tend to join other migrants from the same home region. Almost everywhere, African migrants form social associations with the objective of exchanging experiences, help each other in difficult situations, keep cultural activities alive and build an interest group that represents their concerns in the host society much better than an individual would be able on its own. If their situation permits, they also contribute to the development of their home region or community. Often the political and cultural situation in the home country will be reflected in the formation of such associations, which in turn influences the intensity of cooperation and solidarity. Conversely the legal framework and the general situation in the host country have a strong impact on the activities that migrants are permitted to carry out to make a living, and whether these migrants are imagined as mere temporary visitors or as a cultural or economic resource for the host country. Based on anthropological field research on trade networks between Africa and Asia in the framework of the project "Africa's Asian Options" at the Goethe University Frankfurt and earlier research on trade networks in African societies, this paper studies the activities of selected African migrant communities in China and Malaysia. It examines and compares their global business networks, the organization of economic activities and their membership in social associations that unite migrants from the same home country. The paper argues that the labour and migration regulations in the different countries provide a framework that influences the duration of stay, the types of economic activities

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and the intensity of identification with the host societies, which might encourage or reduce informal and clandestine activities in the long run.

1. Introduction

African migrants are found on all continents across the globe. Countless Africans were involuntarily moved from their home countries, but many others voluntarily left and increasingly do so at present to find new opportunities abroad for business or other ventures. Europe and North America are still the most favoured destinations, but an increasing number of Africans are arriving in Asian countries. With their movements and activities, African diasporic groups contribute to globalization and reconnect Africans dispersed around the world with the places they come from in Africa.

Sometimes it will be appropriate to talk of Africans in general, but it is important to keep in mind, that they are not a uniform and homogenous group. Their self-determined identities range from identification with their extended family or village, their region or their nation, or more generally, Africanity, depending on the context. They have different social provenances, professions and specializations. The experiences of traders and businesspeople differ from those of adventurers who are still trying to make a living and get hold of money for their return home. Businesspeople who have been for a long time in the country and created a company have a wider knowledge of their host society than those who have newly arrived. Most of them will prefer to do some trading but the situation of professional traders who move in and out, is distinct from that of students, employees, adventurers and businesspeople.

This article contributes to the study of African diasporas. It examines the more recent diasporic groups in two Asian countries, Malaysia and China, and their activities and aspirations. It particularly focuses on one group of Africans in these two countries that have been called by economic anthropologists the “trading diaspora.” In the new contexts in Asia today, this group is represented by businesspeople who act as intermediaries between itinerant traders and the local economic actors. These long-established businesspeople also often play an important role in organizing the diasporic community of an African country to mediate between them and the

local authorities.

Research findings are based on three field trips to China between 2013 and 2016, and two to Malaysia between 2014 and 2017 as well as on five field trips to Cameroon between 2008 and 2014, and seven field trips to Mali between 2005 and 2016. This research includes observations in market places and numerous interviews with itinerant traders, businesspeople, community leaders and adventurers both in China and Malaysia, as well as in Cameroon and Mali.[1]

The study begins by situating this research in the African diaspora studies, and presents the situation of Africans first in Malaysia and then in China. The article then illustrates African global business networks with some examples and compares the situation of Africans in both countries. Finally, it discusses the role of African businesspeople in organizing national diasporic groups from the same home country in social associations and in mediating between these groups and the host society. With these elaborations, I will show that the labour and migration regulations in the different countries provide a framework that influences the duration of stay, the types of economic activities and the intensity of identification with the host societies, which might encourage or reduce informal and clandestine activities in the long run. It also illustrates how the different individuals of a diasporic group find together in social associations, which are organized by specific individuals who have a good standing in the community due to their success and their long experience in the country.

2. African Diaspora Studies and the Diaspora Concept

Most studies on Africans outside the African continent are about the classical African diaspora or Black Atlantic, terms that refer to those Africans who have been forcefully transferred to the Americas during the time of the slave trade. As connections to specific places of origin have often been lost, there is a tendency to melt them into one homogenous African diaspora group (for a criticism see Gordon & Anderson, 1999; Dufoix, 2015).

Other scholars focused on the more recent voluntary migration of Africans to North America and Europe, often under the term “the new African diaspora” (Okpewho & Nzegwu 2009; Konadu-Agyemang, Takyi & Arthur 2006; Falola & Childs,2004; Akyeampong, 2000). These studies discuss again questions of race andthe conceptualization of the diaspora identi-

ties, the "global" consequences of migrating Africans (Zeleza, 2008, 2010), and occasionally they also examine African art work and religion in the diaspora. Members of this new African diaspora left their countries of origin for the purpose of higher education, and since the 1990s, also due to lacking opportunities, to conflicts or political instability at home, in search of employment, trade, or to join relatives abroad. Thesestudies are, however, less interested in the daily activities of this new diaspora and how it is organized. Other studies examine the contribution of these new diasporic groups to the development of their African home countries (Åkeson & Baaz, 2015; Black & King, 2004) or the impact of returnees (Obiagele, 1995, for Ghana).

Movements of Africans, both voluntarily and forcefully, across the Sahara to the Mediterranean, to the Orient and Asia have been studied to a far lesserextent, although recent research has uncovered traces of these movements and of African kingdoms in Asia (De Silva, 2010; Keita, 2005).But also the more recent movements of Africans to Asian countries have hardly been studied so far, except perhaps for the presence of Africans in China (Bertoncello & Bredeloup, 2009; Bodomo,2012; Cissé, 2015; Haugen,2012; Le Bail, 2009; Marfaing & Thiel, 2015). There are African diasporas also in other Asian countries such as Japan (Schans, 2012), India (Modi, 2011) or Malaysia (Röschenthaler, 2017a, 2017b). International economic agreements, the development of communication technologies and the improvement of transport facilitiescreated new dimensions of such movements while enabling people to easily stay connected to their home places at the same time, especially via mobile phones with internet access.

There are similarities between the recent and the classical diaspora groups and also differences. But it seems that, with the exception of Africans in North America, only scholars (for example, Akyeampong, 2000; Ollong, 2013) use the term diaspora to refer to these Africans. The same is true for the term "migrants". In various Asian countries, those Africans I have talked to did not use these terms on their own when they referred to themselves. They rather called themselves traders, businesspeople, travellers, adventurers or expatriates.

There has indeed been some debate about whether it still makes sense to call these new movements of Africans "diasporas" at all. The term "diaspora" has been criticized for being too widely used and having lost its

meaning (Brubaker, 2005: XV; Zeleza,2010). It could be argued that these new movements have much in common with the classical diasporic communities. Their members live outside of their home community but have decided for this step out of their own will. It is not easy, however, to draw a clear line of voluntary and involuntary movement and to define in a generalizing way whether they left to return soon or at an indefinite time. For the same reason, also the term migrant is complicated. Most Africans will keep contact to their home, for various reasons. In the host society, too, most members of one African country know each other (depending on the size of the community), and they also know and associate with migrant members from neighbouring countries as well. They are keen to know each other, because it is important for them to have a large social network that might provide mutual help, business contacts and the circulation of news between the host and the home countries.

Scholars have also applied the term "diaspora" to the context of trade. "Trading diasporas" refers to settled strangers from a specific region who have settled in a host country to act as intermediaries for fellow traders from the same home region. This term became known in anthropology by the studies of Abner Cohen (1969) about the Hausa diaspora in the Yoruba towns in Nigeria (for more examples of trading world-wide diasporas, see Curtin, 1984). The trading diaspora is constituted by settlements of traders from one and the same home region along a trade route, which is frequented by traders from this home region. These settling traders can be found in all the important sections along the trade route so that traders with their cargo and entire caravans can stop in such a secure place and carry out their activities. These settling traders are also called landlord-brokers (Brooks, 1972; Hill, 1966), as they offer lodging, storeroom, catering, credit, contacts, information and act as intermediaries between the local population and their trading fellow countrymen.

Such trading diasporas have mostly been described for caravan trade (Lovejoy, 1980), but similar forms are known from trading outposts at maritime ports. They can be found again in modified form in present trading activities. In this paper the term "diaspora" is used in this sense of trading diasporas and adapted to the more recent context of the movements of African traders and businesspeople to Asian countries.

3. African Trading Diasporas in Asia

Trade contacts between Africa and Asia existed for centuries, especially between the East African coastal areas, and the Indian Ocean world, including the Straits of Melaka (Love, 2006). In the twentieth century, African traders first went to Europe to purchase trade goods, which they exported to African countries, and when Asian countries increased their industrial production, they expanded their trade networks to these markets as well (see also Bredeloup, 2012). They first went to Dubai (Pelican, 2014), followed by business people who created trading posts and, shortly later, continued to other Asian countries. From the 1980s onward a small number of African traders were in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong, where they met Chinese traders from whom they acquired trade goods, or purchased locally produced merchandise (interviews Guangzhou and Hong Kong, March 2013, 2016; Bertoncello & Bredeloup 2009; Bredeloup, 2012; Marfaing & Thiel, 2015). Others also tried to carry out business in India. Most of these traders purchased trade goods and returned home with their cargo, while others remained in these cities as businesspeople, and began to act as intermediaries between the Asian suppliers and their fellow country people. They settled there more permanently (or better as much as the host countries allowed them to do) and created trading companies and cargo agencies, which made it easier for fellow African traders to supply themselves with trade goods and ship them to African countries.

Depending on the international financial opportunities or crises and the local political situation, trading places shifted from one country to another. And at the beginning of the 2000s many of these business people moved on to China to be nearer to the source of affordable consumer goods that they intended to import to Africa. Others remained where they were in Hong Kong, Bangkok, or Kuala Lumpur. When these businesspeople moved from one place to the next, following the itinerant traders, they did not always give up their position in the first country they had moved to but kept a branch office there and in this way established a network of connected trading posts, filled by extended family members (interviews, Guangzhou, March 2013, May 2016).

4. The Situation of Africans in Malaysia: Students, Small-Scale Brokers and Adventurers

My African interview partners in Malaysia came predominantly from Cameroon and Nigeria. Some of them knew of some Cameroonians and Nigerians who had arrived in the country in the late 1970s or early 1980s (interviews, Kuala Lumpur, March 2014). It was not easy for them to settle down, but at this early time, the relatively small numbers of Africans were well-respected businesspeople in Malaysia.

To be able to officially establish a business, a foreign businessperson has to find a Malaysian partner in whose name the company is registered and who is automatically entitled to receive 30% of the profits the company makes. Some Africans opted for a local Malaysian (Indian, Malay, or Chinese) partner with whom to open a shop, others managed to marry a Malaysian with whom they can build up a business. More recently, in the conglomerate of cities around Kuala Lumpur, a small range of African businesses such as restaurants, cargo agencies, and shops selling African foodstuff, apparel, and accessories imported from China can be found. These are formal businesses with signboards at their premises, but most of them are registered under the name of the local partner. Only those businesspeople with sufficient means are capable to open a business on their own.

Africans arrived in larger numbers only from the 2000s onwards, after the Malaysian government had privatized its higher education sector in the course of neoliberal reforms and private universities actively began to recruit students from developing countries. Since the 2000s, a growing number of Africans indeed moved to Malaysia, and in 2012 the immigration counted almost 80,000 Africans (Zurairi, 2013). The figure includes Africans who enter the country with different visa categories, such as for study, business, tourism, and it also includes itinerant traders. Enrolment figures at universities show that African students make up a large group of 25,000, and Nigerians are most numerous among them (Röschenthaler, 2017a), but these figures do not provide details about the remaining Africans and also do not necessarily tell what people are actually doing in the country.

Since the neoliberal reforms, the Malaysian government encourages Africans to enter the country as temporary visitors. It expects foreign students to pay their fees, finish their studies quickly and then return home. They

are not supposed to spend their time working in the country. But African youths do not merely come to study, they also want to work and save for their return. However, with a student visa they are denied regular employment or start a business. Part of the problem is that Africans discover this only after their arrival in Malaysia. During their studies, only a few have additional support from their parents or fellowships but most of them have to find a way to survive. They come from middle-class families, many are already in their thirties, have worked and/or made a degree in their home country, but still search for financial opportunities abroad (Röschenthaler, 2017a).

That so many young Africans leave their home countries has to do with the structural adjustment programmes and the privatization of state enterprises in the 1990s. These two factors have greatly reduced the job opportunities for youth in the public sector. Previously, a foreign university certificate was the entry ticket to a civil servant position with pension scheme and health insurance; such a job often supported entire extended families. Hence, after the 1990s, many young people, even if they had university certificates, were increasingly unable to find regular income, construct their own houses, and found a family. They were left to find other ways of making a living. This situation led to a phenomenon that Richard Banégas and Jean-Pierre Warnier (2001) have called "nouvelle figures de succès (new figures of success)" with which they refer to youth who make money with whatever means available at home or abroad, and migrating to Western countries was in Anglophone Cameroon called "bushfalling" (Alpes, 2012; Mercer, Page &Evans, 2008). So when during this same time period, Europe and North America made it increasingly difficult to migrate to these regions (see Ollong, 2013, for Cameroonians), and the youth got to know that Malaysia opened its higher education sector, and China its economy, this was seen as a welcome alternative. However, especially as far as Malaysia is concerned, they did not know or expect that they would be unable to work while studying (Daniels, 2014).

Meanwhile the Malaysian government allows foreign students to work for a limited time in a few low pay sectors but this is highly unattractive and even getting such permission is difficult. In dire straits to survive, some do illegal activities. Many, however, try to find other informal ways. They offer brokerage services to fellow Africans such as to provide telephone credit, social contacts and documents, the transfer of money to Africa and from Africa

to Malaysia, or help students from their home country find admission to a Malaysian university (a service for which they are paid by both the student and the university). These activities don't leave many traces, their mobile phones are their offices, their knowledge and network are their capital; they work at their own risk and trust is essential in such a venture. Others offer more material services such as cooking, hair and beauty treatment, some sell clothes that they bring from Nigeria or China, or organize social events, night club sessions, or prayer meetings. Most of these activities are organized informally so that only those can participate who are informed by their social network (Röschenthaler, 2017b).

5. Africans in China: Traders and Businesspeople

Different from Malaysia, in China the first Africans arrived in the second half of the twentieth century as students. The Chinese government provided fellowships to young Africans whose government had opted for a socialist ideology at the time. Most of them returned after completion of their studies (Bredeloup, 2012; Haugen, 2012). Traders and businesseople, however, arrived to Mainland China only after China had managed to become a member in the WTO in 2001, and opened its markets to foreigners. But, as we saw earlier, African traders were already nearby and began to move in to evaluate the incipient market nearer at its source, as they knew Chinese merchandise already from Chinese traders in other (mostly) Asian cities.

These initial African traders and businesspeople who had already worked in other Asian markets were soon followed by larger numbers of new upcoming traders and business people who established cargo and trading companies. The word spread quickly that China offered promising business opportunities, and through such networks of family and friends gradually more and more young traders and adventurers followed. Not all of these travellers managed to make easy profit as the competition grew, and so some of them diverted their attention to illegal activities with repercussions for all Africans as such, in a similar way as in Malaysia. Trade went well until the mid 2000s, when numerous less experienced traders joined these first Africans and sought to find their luck in the Chinese market, too. Exact numbers are difficult to obtain but have been estimated even to be 500,000 (Bodomo, 2015: 85), with over 12,000 African students studying in China on Chinese government scholarships in 2013 (Baitie, 2013). In Guangzhou alone 16,000 Africans were resident in 2014, and at the city's

checkpoints were counted 430,000 arrivals and exits by nationals from African countries in the first nine months of 2014 (Zhuang, 2014). As in Malaysia, too, in the first years until about the mid 2000s African businesspeople were highly respected.

As the number of Africans increased, in 2008 in the wake of the Olympic Games, the Chinese government made radical controls against visa over stayers and other activities they considered illegal (Bredeloup, 2012). Since then, the situation has constantly become more and more difficult and had a huge impact not only on the adventurers but also on regular businesspeople. In 2016, a Malian businessman told me that he grew up in DR Congo, begun trading in Thailand in 1995 and then moved to Guangzhou in 2003. He was worried about the situation that the Chinese government had created and that became more and more tight. Africans were no longer allowed to accommodate even family members on visit in their apartments. China made it increasingly difficult for Africans to continue pursuing their businesses (difficulties to obtain visas, high taxes, no way if integration and becoming a citizen) so that he had already lost thousands of dollars (interview, Guangzhou, May 2016).

For a businessperson to establish a company in China is as complicated as in Malaysia. Both governments protect their national economies and foreign business people can establish a company only with a local partner, as a branch company, or with a substantial sum of money at their disposal. In China establishing a company in the name of a foreigner has not been possible at all since very recently, and, I was told, that at least 1 million RMB (Chinese currency) are required (interviews with Nigerian and Malian businesspeople, Guangzhou, May 2016). Therefore, most foreign companies who work in China establish a branch company with headquarters somewhere else. One Malian businessman, for example, had his headquarter in Bamako, and branch companies in Guangzhou where he purchased his merchandise and in Dakar where his trade goods from Asia arrived, and were transported to Bamako (interview, Guangzhou, May 2016).

6. Comparing African Diasporas in Malaysia and China

The African diasporas in Malaysia and in China are both characterized by high fluctuation. Individuals gradually move to other places as soon as more promising economic opportunities come up or when their presence in a country becomes difficult due to high competition or xenophobic attitudes.

Fluctuation is highest among the adventurers and students, but movement to other places is comparably less easy for those who have invested in a company or married a local woman with children in the host country.

In both countries traders and businesspeople form an important part of the African diasporic groups. Others stay there as students, adventurers, employees, teachers, artists, or sportsmen. Even though the aspirations of those who arrive might be the same, and also the respective national laws and policies are similar, each host country provides a specific social and cultural framework. In both countries, the extension of visas is complicated, immigration and business laws and policies prevent foreigners to arrange for longer-term stays, and there is a general attitude that is hostile towards such plans.

In both countries higher education was seen as a means to attract foreign students. In China this was first for ideological reasons and later with the idea that a positive experience of study in China would make Chinese culture known in the world (Diakon & Röschenthaler, 2017), as students returning home would disseminate the wonderful knowledge they had obtained of Chinese culture. Many Africans received fellowships from the Chinese government, but traders and businesspeople greatly outnumbered the students after the 2000s, as China did not privatize its higher education sector but the number of its factories grew to produce low price merchandise for export. While in Malaysia it was the other way round, and students began to outnumber traders and businesspeople, as student visas were easily available. The producing sector did not undergo the same high rising development with many products that were interesting to African traders. Malaysian products were less attractive to African customers than those of China. Also export taxes were high and not conducive for traders. In Malaysia, students were rather invited for economic reasons, as private universities saw foreign students as a financial resource.

In China, Africans are visible as traders and businesspeople and through the advertisement with which Chinese companies directly addressed an African clientele. Their trading shops and cargo agencies are visible because African businesses and customers concentrate in certain districts of Guangzhou and in Yiwu. Also, the number of traders and businesspeople is higher than in Malaysia, because of the many factories in the hinterland of these cities, which produce large quantities of affordable consumer goods

that are attractive for the African market and leave Mainland China in numerous containers on a daily basis.

In Malaysia it is the private education sector that invites foreigners to stay there temporarily. The number of established traders and businesspeople is fewer and the shipping opportunities and customs procedures seem to be more expensive. Africans as well as their shops and restaurants are much more dispersed in the conglomerate of cities around Kuala Lumpur. Most of their businesses are not sample shops but shops in which African food, beauty products and apparel from China are sold to other Africans. In China, such shops are not seen as the Chinese government prohibits the import of African foodstuff. This produced in Malaysia, much more than in China, what can be called an "enclave economy" (Zhou, Xu & Shenasi, 2015) that has emerged for Africans only, as Malaysia did not offer any opportunity for Africans to make a living. Hence, Africans among themselves created a market for each other offering services to other Africans, mostly from the same or from neighbouring African countries than their own (Röschenthaler, 2017a, 2017b).

Both countries have similar restrictions against the creation of companies by foreigners, which is possible only under the name of a local partner, as a branch of an existing company abroad, or with substantial amounts of money at one's disposal. It is hardly possible to employ Africans but the law requires that Malaysian or Chinese citizens respectively need to be employed first, as both governments protect the interests of its own citizens. In China, it is hardly possible for Africans to work as employee in a factory. Nevertheless, different business landscapes have emerged in Malaysia and in China. Malaysia does not restrict the import of foodstuff and apparel, and hence a range of mostly Nigerians shops has emerged that sell food stuff from Africa, apparel and accessories from China. This is not possible in China, and if ever, then only in small quantities and sold undercover in a Chinese shop. Here, Africans have above all shops that display Chinese merchandise for customers to explore and place orders, as these Africans have the contacts to the factory. Others have created shipping agencies, which organize the transport to warehouses at the country of destination. In Malaysia, African cargo agencies do exist but are rare and there are only a few shops run by Africans that display Malaysian merchandise.

These conditions in China and Malaysia make it difficult for Africans to

stay there on a longer-term basis. They have to renew their visas every few years and only very few are granted a long-term residence. Some have families with a local woman and children, and live in the country for more than ten years, but do not receive Chinese or Malaysian citizenship. In China, students were principally also not allowed to work while studying, but there was probably no student who did not carry out some kind of trade as well, while working meant in the first place not being employed by a company. At least at the beginning, most students in China arrived with fellowships; they were not forced to look for the means of their daily survival as in Malaysia, where students with fellowships were rather the exception. This made it much more difficult for students in Malaysia to survive, not to talk about saving means for their return.

7. Global African Traders

African businesspeople have created a variety of networks that make them global agents. The early traders and their cargo agents collected experience in their home country and in different Asian countries to which they had moved earlier, often subsequently. Those who came later, often also tried out different countries on their journeys to provide themselves with an individual portfolio of trade goods. While traders and businesspeople grew in importance, they kept, if possible, branch companies in one country, and opened new branch companies in different countries. These traders contributed to the development of their home countries, as they provided the population with affordable trade goods of a better quality than most of the Chinese traders who had meanwhile also arrived in the African countries to sell their merchandise there (Röschenthaler, 2016).

Most of these businesspeople do not only bring merchandise to their African home country but have established global business networks. Some have offices in several African countries as well as in Europe or North America, as a few examples will illustrate.

The first example is a successful Igbo businessman who began his career as a textile trader in Nigeria, together with his elder brother. In 1996, they went to Dubai. The elder brother established a cargo company in Dubai, and the younger brother brought the trade goods to Nigeria and sold them there. In 2000s, the younger brother went to China to establish a branch company of the cargo business in Guangzhou and another in Hong Kong.

In Guangzhou he soon had about thirty Chinese employees. In the mid 2010s, he opened offices in Vietnam, the US and the Netherlands. He also opened a factory in Nigeria to produce high-end furniture and created an NGO with which he campaigned not only for a more conducive economic environment for business people in Nigeria but also for better living conditions in his home country, supporting local community development (interview, Guangzhou, March 2016).

In 2014, two Malian traders in Guangzhou narrated to me their business histories. One sold apparel, shoes and tires to Mali, Burundi and Malawi since 2006, where several of his brothers were staying. The other arrived in Guangzhou in 2002 and sold apparel to Mali and Mozambique, where the headquarters of his company were (interview, Guangzhou, December 2014). Two brothers from Guinea had opened a shop in the Overseas Trading Mall at Guangzhou in 2004 as a branch company of a business in the US where most of their family stayed. Their customers were from the US, Mexico, West and Central Africa mainly, and less from the DR Congo, Senegal or Guinea. They sold motorbikes, household goods and articles for babies (interview, March 2013). In 2014, they had given up their shop in Guangzhou, probably due to the restrictive measures of the authorities. These businesspeople did not only sell Chinese manufactured goods to their home countries, but internationally to a wide range of customers.

Many of these successful African businesspeople in China told me about their wish to import not only merchandise to Africa that was produced in Asia but to invest in their home country and begin to produce these same products in their country (interviews Shanghai, Hong Kong, Yiwu, Guangzhou, March 2013).

8. Social Associations and Community Integration

For whichever purpose people move to another country, they tend to join other migrants from the same home region. In Guangzhou in 2013, a Guinean businessman and community leader told me: “You know that China is different from Europe, there are stricter laws, there are completely different laws, so when Africans started growing in numbers in China, they found that they needed to get together, to get more organized so as to handle their problems together. That is first of all the reason that made us organize our communities in associations”.

Almost everywhere, African migrants cerate social associations with the objective of exchanging experiences, help each other in difficult situations, keep cultural activities alive and build an interest group that represents their concerns in the host society much better than an individual would be able to do on its own. If their situation permits, they also contribute to the development of their home region or community.

Businesspeople with some standing and long years of experience in a country are those who encouraged diasporic groups to gather together and form an association of all those who come from the same country. Nationals can register their names with them and then the association can help them in times of trouble and conflict with the authorities. Such national associations exist in Guangzhou for Malians, Nigerians, Cameroonians, Guineans, Senegalese, Nigeriens, Congolese and many more. In Hong Kong and in Malaysia there are similar associations.

These African community leaders, as they call themselves, play an important role as mediators and culture brokers between the people from their country and the Chinese or Malaysian authorities. They have begun to negotiate with the authorities that associational meetings are helping to bring all those from one country together and that they can contribute to educate them on Chinese laws and culture, exchange information and reduce conflict. The Nigerian community leader explained in 2013, that in China each country has its national association and the subregional associations, and at the beginning, the Chinese government did not understand how useful these meetings were to keep people in order and educate them about the Chinese laws. And in order to make this effort more coherent, from 2007 onwards, the African community leaders met on a regular basis to discuss how to proceed with the Chinese authorities. He says, meanwhile the Chinese authorities would understand the advantages of these meetings, and no longer prohibit them categorically as a threat to national security.

In addition to these national associations there are subregional associations that bring together individuals from one home area when members are too numerous to participate directly in the national association. In these meetings, community leaders represent the group. Cameroonians in Malaysia, for example, whose student numbers gradually rose from 4 in 2003 to 141 in 2009, have a national Cameroonian association since 2005, and associations that group individuals from different regions of Cameroon. There is

an association for the Anglophones, the littoral region, the Grassfields, and the capital Yaounde, and various Cameroonian students associations at different universities (Röschenthaler, 2017a). Similar associations, but more in number, exist for Nigerians (5969 students in 2009). The president of the Nigerians in Diaspora association is one important businessman who stays in Malaysia since the early 1980s.

Businesspeople with standing are presidents of the national associations for several reasons: They have legal papers of residence, they are respected in the host society, they have successfully established their business in the host country, and they have the longest experience in the country. They are respected among the members of the national diaspora group and are therefore able to organize their people in the diaspora. They integrate the hustlers and adventurers and remind them of their duties to their homeland, and with some talent can convince them to find an occupation, which is not illegal.

Most Africans in a country abroad are members of such associations, as membership in the association helps to make life in the country easier; members exchange their experiences, can help each other out in times of problems, create a social network and reconnect to the home country by exchanging news and, of possible, send back remittances to contribute to the development of the home region, beyond the family level. The associations in Malaysia as well as in China are basically busy with their internal affairs in Malaysia, as the situation is complicated for them (for associations of Cameroonians in the US, see Ollong, 2013). These associations also provide a platform where to sell trade goods or items brought along from a journey home.

Most of these associations in Malaysia meet in informal restaurants put up by a member (Röschenthaler, 2017b). Basically, businesspeople and traders are less likely to join associations as these meetings take a lot of time, which they need for completing their businesses in the short time their visa grants them. But in Hong Kong also an African business association has been created in order to help traders secure their trade goods and prevent them from being cheated. They register and pay a fee for any transaction that is monitored by the association. As a Ghanaian businessman told me in 2013 that “at the beginning, there were not so many traders, so that it was not necessary to have an association, but now that their number is

continually rising, they encountered themselves with problems in terms of discrimination, and payment, and this made it helpful to have this association, especially those of traders and businesspeople".

9. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine more recent African diaspora groups in two Asian countries, Malaysia and China, and their different activities and aspirations. I have traced the beginnings of some of these new African diaspora groups in these countries, beginning with students in China and traders in Malaysia who were, after the structural adjustment programmes in their home countries and the growing dynamic of Asian markets, followed by a great number of traders, small businesspeople and adventurers, arriving with student, business or tourist visas. Most of them keep a close relationship to their home region, which is greatly facilitated by modern communication technology. Most of them initially left to find some means and return to their home country to put up a business there, build a house and found a family.

In both countries, China and Malaysia, Africans were initially respected business partners. The problems only began when the number of Africans grew, the market became congested, and they were unable to make enough money to return. Many of them overstayed their visas and resorted to illegal activities. At present, in both countries, the situation has become tenser and the authorities are attempting to reduce the numbers of Africans, tending to criminalize them and stereotype them as one homogenous group of people. In both countries, their more permanent presence has not been anticipated, and many hindrances prevent foreigners to work as regular employees, create their own companies or become national citizens.

While in earlier trade contexts, especially of caravan trade, landlord-brokers were those individuals who mediated between the itinerant traders and the local host population, the businesspeople have in present-day contexts taken over this role in several ways. They perform some of the roles that landlord-brokers had, such as providing information about markets and if they are permitted, they lodge related traders. They also help them find their trade goods and explain the local laws and regulations. If they have a cargo agency, they organize the transport of the trade goods from the factory to the door of their customers' warehouses in the destination

country.

These long-established businesspeople also often play an important role in organizing the diasporic community of an African country and mediate between them, the local authorities and the population. They also explain cultural differences to the African community and make the situation in which they find themselves known to the authorities of the host country as well as the benefits of holding such diaspora group meetings. These community leaders organize social events and association meetings, which have the potential to discipline members, and offer ideas of how to make a reasonable living. In the long run, they can contribute to reducing informal and clandestine activities. Respected individuals also act as role models when they contribute some of their wealth to the development of their home countries and provide philanthropic donations to the needy population in the host country.

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