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## Chinese Devils, the Global Market, and the Declining Power of Togo's Nana-Benzes

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**Abstract:** This article examines the shifting representations of and discourses produced about Chinese salesmen and their collaborators in the small West African nation of Togo. It suggests that in this context representations of China's so-called New Scramble for Africa are troublesome, namely because they tend to silence the role of Togolese women traders as producers and as central historical and economic subjects in the making of a postcolonial commodity chain for printed African textiles. In so doing the article questions standard economic theories of global market forces, debunks stereotypes regarding the Chinese advance in West African markets, and challenges assumptions about the vulnerability of African societies.

### Introduction

In April 2004, several variations of a rumor circulated throughout Lomé's Grand-Marché, Togo's main market and a former hub for the distribution of import textiles in West Africa: a woman trader involved in the import of Chinese-produced fabric imitations had been murdered at her home. While the press, which eventually reported on the story, suggested that the circumstances of the murder remained unclear, the rumor had already circulated throughout the market. The victim had only recently set up her own business, and she had been relatively unknown to Lomé's well-established textile trading elite. According to the victim's servants, who had been locked in a closet by the four assailants, the victim was tortured and her legs were broken before she was killed. No jewels or money was stolen.

Because of their apparent lack of rationality, the two crucial elements of the story—torture before the killing and the absence of any theft—gave rise to speculations. Since such gruesome crimes were virtually unknown locally, the murder was instantly associated with the victim's trade partners: Chinese businessmen. As rumor had it, the victim had refused to deliver drugs she had smuggled into the country while importing cheap Chinese imitations of European-produced "African" fabrics from Shanghai. (The real European wax-print fabrics, which have been produced exclusively for the West African market since the late nineteenth century, hold a high-rank status position in the long-standing local textile hierarchy and are among the































1908. In 2008 production ceased in Manchester and ABC machinery was transferred to Ghana, where CHA continues to produce its brands ATL and ABC.

13. In December 2006 an anti-Chinese demonstration was organized by a group of women traders. Unlike wholesalers, who travel to China and place their orders directly at the site of production, small-scale traders had become dependent on a series of new intermediaries, not only Chinese, but also Sahelian, Indian, and even Iranian agents. Several cases of agents delivering unsatisfactory merchandise—or, in rare cases, of disappearing with the trader's money altogether—as well as cases of Chinese retailers selling at prices no Togolese small-scale trader could compete with, resulted in the women's protest march. Giving visible expression to what local traders perceived as discriminatory trading, the movement called for political regulation of the problem. A legal decree in support of their position has essentially been unenforced in practice.

14. *Sika'a* magazine's biweekly edition of 7,000 circulates widely throughout the Togolese capital at the moderate cost of 250 francs CFA. The caricature described here appeared in *Sika'a* 80 (December 14, 2010).

15. "Ca doit etle sulement eles bon" reads the *Sika'a* caricature, instead of "ça doit être sûrement très bon."