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## 'Developmental Effects of Foreign Civil Construction Companies in Nigeria' by Dare Dan



*Text and images by Dare Dan*

A Road in an Odd Skirt and Blouse

As I write, two different construction companies undertake the building of 127.6Km Lagos-Ibadan expressway in Nigeria. The road, which connects Lagos (Nigeria's most populous State) to Ibadan (capital of Oyo State), also serves as the major route to the northern and eastern parts of the country. It is the busiest single road in Africa, with more than sixty percent of the nation's land transport and logistics economy centered on it.

Before now, the expressway had been notoriously deplorable on the Benin-Ore highway. The level of dilapidation was horrible, to say the least. But after many years of public outcry, auto crashes and needless loss of lives and property, the reconstruction project was eventually awarded. Two of the three major international players in Nigeria's road construction sector - then

- Julius Berger Nigeria Plc and Reynolds Construction Company Limited (RCC) won the bids.

The road was allegedly completed during the then former General Olusegun Obasanjo's military era in 1978. Apparently, nothing was done towards refurbishment and maintenance of road until the return of Olusegun Obasanjo as a civilian President in 1999. An incomputable eight years of Obasanjo's administration were wasted in a bureaucratic contract arrangement with Bi-Courtney Highways Services Limited (BCHSL), an indigenous construction company owned by the Nigerian Businessman and Lawyer, Tunde Babalakin.

A good portion of the road was still a death-trap in 2012, after President Goodluck Jonathan's four-year tenure in office. The contractors traded blame and made all manner untenable excuses for not delivering on promise till Jonathan left office.

A few days ago, I undertook a journey and plied the road in question. Different parts of the highway were partitioned into sections with cautionary signs indicating a particular vendor's work-in-progress. I overheard fellow commuters argue for and against the company doing a better job and the one causing traffic havoc with their activities. "Why didn't they give the construction to one company?" One of the passengers suddenly asked out of curiosity. "Who knows..." the other had given a simple but unsatisfying response.

We noted the change at the Sagamu interchange to Ibadan as the vehicle slipped from a pitch black way, lined in-between with a single file of brick, to a grey way demarcated by a surface drainage system.

Going by my observation, during the trip, Lagos-Ibadan Expressway would be one patchwork of civil engineering with two varying qualities. It might bear a signature of two different designs; in order words, what I have tagged a "road in an odd skirt and blouse."

This is illustrative of the state of the Nigerian development outlook.

Still The Choice Maiden

The commercial lewdness in the Nigerian space by foreign companies is nothing new. In fact, Nigeria as an entity is the largest product of business activities by companies of foreign nationals in Africa.

In the late nineteenth century, before the amalgamation, the Royal Niger Company was formed by conglomerates of British companies trying to ward off competitors of German and French nationals. Royal Niger, with the backing of the British government, eventually achieved its aim, monopolising trade routes and business activities from the then Fulani emirates down to the lower Niger river, and eventually came up with the idea of amalgamating regions of their businesses into a Potemkin village.

A little over a century, the outlook of the nation is still very much like an economic utility rather than a socio-political entity. Developments are not culturally driven. Instead, ideas of social and economic growth are directly

Western and, in recent times, Asian imports. So one sees overhead bridges in places where people won't use them or are being forced to do so, or a man proudly adorning a shirt with inscriptions of a language he's never heard of; or a beautiful park at the centre of the city no one visits because there are scoundrels sleeping at its gates.

Politicians govern with no political will. Shares in private companies bought by individuals in government dictate government policies—civil servants are clandestine businessmen and women. Indigenous companies which should have been birthed by homegrown academic institutions remained grounded, with students in tertiary institutions internalising and regurgitating chronologically misplaced academic syllabi.

Africa, particularly Nigeria remains a raw resource and a toast to more powerful economies of the world.

In the international community, however, where the race for the most powerful nation in the world is yet to reach the finished line, Africa, whose indigenous institutions and companies are yet to own their space in terms of self-sustainable production of goods and services, remains the destination for the final lap of this race.

The Third Musketeer

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping, a Chinese leader, in what one could rightly argue was a twist in political ideology, a transforming economic strategy, nonetheless, implemented basic and fundamental economic reforms. China, a densely populated nation, mired in the throes of abject poverty, magically sprang to a superpower economy in less than a decade. One of such transforming policies was opening up China for trade with virtually all the nations of the world, and most especially, with Africa. The move reiterated one fact: to truly be a great nation is to have your presence stamped in the African space.

Today, in Nigerian, we are experiencing the full force effect of that reform mostly in infrastructural development. There are 120 different federal and state infrastructural projects by the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) going on or completed in Nigeria, said Shi Hongbing, CEO, CCECC, during a television interview. Among these projects are the very big ones, like the interstate railroad projects linking Lagos through to Abuja and up to Kano; the medium ones, like the Lagos Rail Mass Transit from Okokomaiko through Mile2 up to Marina; and the mini ones, such as the road rehabilitation of the NNPC Ejigbo Road through Canoe to Ajao Estate. Before the advent of the Chinese, these contracts, which are obviously of different standards and magnitude, would have been awarded, for example, to Julius Berger Nigeria Limited, John Kaid Construction Company, and/or Emerson Construction Limited respectively. What's Chinese construction company doing rightly to wade through the very complex Nigerian terrain, beating other construction companies at all levels in Nigeria?

Political Undercurrents

Just like the Niger Royal Company in the late nineteenth century Nigeria, the Chinese firms are not just private companies, they are strongly backed by their home government. But unlike enacting political policies (which couldn't have been possible in the present world political dispensation) over Africa to shape the space for business, the China penetrates with decisive economic weapons.

In December 2015, China's current president, Xi Jinping, in a China-Africa summit held in South Africa, announced a USD 60 billion funds for Africa Development. It is the largest of its kind, ranging from granting zero interest loans to government projects, enlarging foreign direct investment, and providing capitals in various fund institutions created to aid developments on the continent. One of the African leaders has called this move 'God sent'. It, therefore, would only be profitable for Nigeria's and by extension, Africa's political office holders, to shelve even companies owned by their buddies and key into this bounty.

Before this climax, however, it would be interesting to trace the appearance of the Chinese (as investors) in the Nigerian space back to the mid-1990s. According to a Nigerian Historian and activist, AJ Dagga- Tolar, the Chinese became an option as international economic partner for Nigeria when General Sani Abacha, the then Nigerian military dictator, among his many anti-democratic policies and actions, executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and his cohorts to forestall the human right movements rising from the oil-rich Ogoni land.

Nigerians and the international community frowned at this. Increasing hostility towards the West by the Abacha government prompted him to look towards an alternative super economy with whom he could tie. He looked towards China. But not much was achieved then, and not much would be heard of the Chinese investors until later into the Umaru Musa Yar'adua's short tenure in office between 2007 and 2009.

In his book: Power, Politics and Death, Olusegun Adeniyi, the then spokesman for President Umaru Yar'Adua, shed light on the intents of the Chinese on the Nigerian soil and how they almost struck a deal with the Yar'Adua's led government. He wrote about the Chinese consortium led by a certain Africa company; its proposal to the president to acquire a large number of oil and gas assets estimated to contain six billion barrels of oil reserves and offer USD 50 billion in an exchange with what they described as 'alternative funding for infrastructural development in Nigeria'. It was said to be very difficult at that time to resist the offer.

The president had desperately wanted a reform in the oil sector which would translate to commensurate infrastructural development in the country. But after a scrutinising look into the deal by the Nigerian government (which did not go without lobbying and bribery within private and government interests), the idea was dropped only to resurface at the tail end of the president's life on his sick bed and towards the abrupt end of his tenure.

Coincidentally, or so it seems, both General Sani Abacha and President Musa Yar'adua died untimely in office before they could find any headway with the Chinese.

Kingsley

Today, the Chinese are in Nigeria, and infrastructural development is in full swing in several parts of the country. Could it be that the new government of Muhammadu Buhari eventually struck a deal? Or are they here on other social-political terms? What does their presence spell for other construction companies and how are Nigerians faring with the new trend?

I met with one Kingsley, a construction worker on a CCECC site in Lagos. I approached him because he looked to me a person of thought. It all started as I was catching my breath under the bridge, after a long walk. I caught a colleague of his, grouch on something obviously bothering him.

The colleague didn't seem to be saying Kingsley had offended him. Obviously, he was talking to Kingsley because Kingsley was the listening type. They were discussing in Igbo language, so I understood nothing of their converse.

Throughout their talk, Kingsley only chipped in once a long while into his colleague's non-stop chatter, cutting him in calm but confident tone. Soon, the colleague seemed satisfied pouring out his mind and left. On the makeshift bench where they sat, Kingsley was about resting his back for a nap when I made a holla.

"Hello, bro! How's work?", I asked.

Seeing that I was coming to sit beside him, he stopped midway to lying down and shifted on the bench as he replied.

"Work dey fine."

I asked why they were not working. Was there any problem?

"No, we dey for break. No problem at all." he said.

Interestingly, he wasn't looking puzzled or trying to know why I asked him those questions. So I kept on asking.

It was a few minutes to 1:00 pm. He said they observe lunch break for one and half hours, 11:30 am to 1:00 pm. Work starts 7:30 am and closes 4:00 pm. Because I had been sitting out there for the major part of the break hours and had seen him with others meandering before eventually coming to sit for the long talk, I guessed he didn't go for lunch, so I asked why he didn't go for lunch since this seemed like the only time to take lunch.

"Break time nah break time...sometimes you go and eat, sometimes you go and sleep. When you don't have money to eat, you sleep. Sometimes you just play around with friends."

"Why would one not have money to eat? Are they not paying well here?", I asked

"payment depends..." he said. "...On the rate you're on."

According to Kingsley, the rate of payments range between #850.00 (2.7 USD) to #1,050.00 (3.34 USD) per day. They are paid monthly. He doesn't know if there are higher levels, but these levels are where himself and his colleagues

operate on.

Kingsley just graduated from high school and wants to have a university degree. He would leave as soon as he has that opportunity; he doesn't see himself finishing the project with the company; he can't wait to leave.

"They will build this thing reach Ajah. It will take long time before they finish," he explains.

Unlike some of his colleagues, Kingsley didn't have prior experience with construction companies before taking up this job as iron bender last October. Many of his colleagues have worked in Julius Berger, RCC, Kaiser, Fountain Construction Company and other construction companies before coming here. On why they left those places for CCECC, Kingsley said they were dismissed due to lack of projects.

"Why do you think a project like this is given to CCECC instead of a company like Julius Berger which everyone knows do stuff like this?" I asked.

Kingsley thinks it's all government policies. He said when the new government came, even CCECC was dismissing people before they started recruiting again. "All these things are government policies," he said. On which of the companies is better: Julius Berger or CCECC, Kingsley didn't let me complete the question before telling me the two companies are incomparable.

"Julius Berger is 100% better than this one. In terms of pay, in terms of human relation. Everything! Julius Berger pay more than double the amount they pay here. Most of us are here because we don't have choice," he concluded.

By this time, it was ten minutes past one. Work was to start soon. We saw a couple of Chinese Engineers strolling up to a crawler excavator.

"It was nice talking with you, Kingsley. My name is Dare" I said.

"I be Kingsley."

We shook hands and I left.

The Quasi Development Scheme

Industry watchers argue that infrastructural development projects in Nigeria are more of propaganda tools than any meaningful development. Politicians base successes of their administrations on how many Kilometres of road constructed or rehabilitated in their tenures. Unlike investment in human capacity development or funding existing educational institutions and initiating new ones, physical constructions are concrete, can be measured and have a direct influence on all and sundry.

Unfortunately, what propels physical development itself, the fundamentals and the nitty-gritty of societal development, is wholly embedded in the human capital. Though time intensive, there is no true development without the influence of human capacity. Thus the rush in infrastructural development embarked upon by the Nigerian government through foreign companies can, critically speaking, only be referred to as mere quasi-development scheme which has no bearing on human capital development.

According to Emmanuel Tobiloba, an educational consultant in Lagos, China's rise to being world power is no accident. To truly embark on the route to development in Nigeria, we must learn from China the basic rules of development. China is the largest supplier of educated workers in the world with more than five million college graduates annually. Over two million of them are from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields.

China has also increased capacity for scientific research, reaching a 12% spending of world's total, second only to the United States, in 2013.

Obviously, the Chinese achieved this lofty height in their socio-economy life through investment in human resources.

For a sustainable development to gain a foothold in Nigeria, therefore, Tobiloba believes institutions at various strata of the society must be taken seriously by the government. Youths, like Kingsley, must be given opportunities at institutions of higher learning. Otherwise, all the bridges and other facilities swelling all around us will keep having the majority of Nigerians living and sleeping under and around them in the nearest future.

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