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"OUR COFFEE IS THE GREEN TEA":

HOW TEA FROM CHINA BECAME THE NATIONAL DRINK IN MALI

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Abstract: Green tea first came on camelback to Mali in the nineteenth century. Today, green tea is transported on container ships via West African ports directly through the agency of African and Chinese importers. This growing South-South trade between China and West Africa largely takes place beyond the better-known North-South trade in black tea between Europe, India and East Africa. Tea is, however, much more than just a hot beverage. Its preparation requires particular equipment and follows specific rules and protocol. Preparing and consuming tea takes time and is a social activity that should be shared with friends. In Mali, in the course of the past two decades, green tea has become so popular that it is considered the national drink. In this context, individuals who transport, buy and sell tea across the continents play a key role. However, little is known about these individuals and how they shape South-South trade. Work on global trade mostly depicts such South-South trade activities in generalizing statistics and metaphors taken from natural phenomena. Drawing on field research in Mali and China, I present portraits of Malian merchants and importers who have been bringing green tea to the Sahel since the 1990s in competition with Chinese traders. I illustrate how these individual traders shape growing South-South trade in green tea and the meanings tea has assumed in Malian society.

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