



# International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation

ISSN: 2582-7138

Received: 03-08-2021; Accepted: 19-08-2021

www.allmultidisciplinaryjournal.com

Volume 2; Issue 5; September-October 2021; Page No. 113-117

## Chinese and the changing pattern of donkey trade

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### Abstract

Donkey trade in the past was localised because of its unattractive profit margins; but in recent years from the early 1990s to date, the nature and pattern of the trade changed from local to national and even at international level. The reason for this development was due to the involvement of the Chinese in the trade sector. Chinese have involved in buying donkey skin in Nigeria and other African countries which they use to produce medicines (Ejiao which is a medicine produce from donkey hides known to cure many ailments from cold to insomnia, anemia, miscarriage, excessive bleeding during menstruation or after birth, etc). This led to the hiking of donkey prices and the enrollment of many people in the trade to enjoy the advantage of the trade. Novelty The purpose of this research is to discuss

development and the changing nature of the trade in Sokoto State of Nigeria which occur as a result of Chinese involvement in the trade. The methodology adopted in conducting this research was collection and interpretation of both primary and secondary sources. Oral source provided about 50% while the remaining 50% of the data used in writing the paper was secondary source. The research found out the changing nature of donkey trade in Sokoto which occur due to the involvement of Chinese in the trade who buy the animal's skin at very exorbitant price which later attracts massive enrollment of people in the trade as a result of its great profit retrieving. The paper is first of its kind especially in the area of study and will serve as a foundation for other researches in the future who want to conduct similar research.

**Keywords:** Chinese, Skin, Ejiao, Trade, Medicine, Gelatin, China, Hide, Donkey

### 1. Introduction

Surging demand and a shortage of donkeys in China have led in the last few years to the unprecedented emergence of a global donkey market. China buying up the global donkey supply to meet her growing internal demand for the production of traditional remedy tonic, 'ejiao' www.China-Daily.org, Many African countries consider exporting of donkey skin and its meat among their most lucrative trade items with republic of China. Countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Botswana, Namibia, are all involved in the donkey trade. Thousands of donkeys in developing countries are killed and subsequently their skins are sold to China for processing into traditional medicine. The demand for donkeys' hide by Chinese has raised the price of donkeys which were hitherto stable in many countries; making them unaffordable for many rural people who use them in their economic activities. www.china-Daily.org China faced too much depopulation of its many numbers of donkeys since 1991 but later served as major importer of donkey skin from many countries in the world which they use to produce *ejiao* medicine. Shortage of donkeys in China has forced Chinese to move forward to African countries. There is huge population of donkeys in China and India. www.china-Daily.org Unfortunately, China's love for donkey meat and its skin posed a great danger to the animal's population and is significantly decreasing. Chinese businesses have shown a growing interest in donkeys in Nigeria over the few years <https://Chinese-Medicine-Fuelling-Rise-inDonkeys>

In recent years donkey shortages in China has exerted pressure on Beijing and many areas in China whereby market agents persistently demand government actions to support local breeders and importers from the rest of the world. The Chinese target has the poor African nations; who are desperately in need of the foreign exchange and ignore all other implications (<https://Chinese-Medicine-Fuelling-Rise-inDonkeys> The primary objective of this paper is to discuss reason for Chinese involvement in donkey trade as well as the changing nature of the business due to their participation and other issues that emerged after their enrollment in the business.

### 2. Chinese Participation in Donkey Trade

Donkey meat was said to have been first consumed in Hubei' China 300 years ago. The legend, prince Zhu Di of the Ming dynasty fought a war and lost the war. This further escalated the shortage of food in his army.

Therefore, his men served him the bread rolls containing the stuffing of horse meat. These bread rolls slowly became known but due to the increased price of horse meat, donkey meat was used to replace the horse meat (<https://Chinese-Medicine-Fuelling-Rise-inDonkeys>, China was among the countries that specialised in producing traditional medicinal products in the world. Over the last 20 years (the early 1990s), China developed the idea of extracting gelatin from donkey skin for use in making medicinal product known as *Ejiao* that cured many ailments from colds to insomnia. (<https://Chinese-Medicine-Fuelling-Rise-inDonkeys> With the current donkey population in China decline from 11 million to 6 million in the 1990s and fell another 300,000 every year which has continued to dwindle due to the animal's low fertility coupled with its nature of long rearing period. This prompted a 23 percent annual price hike of donkey (<https://Chinese-Medicine-Fuelling-Rise-inDonkeys>, In recent years, the average price for a complete donkey skin exceeded 2,600 yuan (395 U.S dollars). The growing trade of donkey meat and skin, had its potential effects on global donkey population. The demand for donkey skin seemed to be substantial and extended beyond China; potentially posing an immediate threat to many donkey dependent communities in the world. <http://edition.cnn.com/Chinese-Need-Donkey>.

Increasing demand for donkey skin by China has escalated the prices for the beast of burden, creating a big problem for Nigerian peasants and artisans who use it. The price of donkey skin rose up to between N70, 000.00 and N80, 000.00. The reason for this hike is the huge purchase of donkeys which are transported to the south where their meat is consumed and their skin exported. <http://edition.cnn.com/Chinese-Need-Donkey> Niger Republic has banned donkey exportation to save its stock, the Chinese to turn to Nigerian donkeys depleting them at an alarming rate. At a market in Ughelli, Delta State, the centre of the Nigerian donkey trade, hundreds of donkeys are crammed into pens under the burning sun as they await their fate. New animal pens are being made every month as the demand for donkey hide and meat is met by a steadily growing supply from the Northern part of the country. From Delta State, hides are shipped to China where they are stewed to render the coveted gelatin known as "*Ejiao*" in Chinese. <http://edition.cnn.com/Chinese-Threatening-Donkey-Population>

The buyers who believe that soluble *Ejiao* gum is an effective remedy for troubles ranging from colds to aging, comprise a market thought to be worth hundreds of millions of dollars every year <File://sys-18/users/public.-Donkey-Meat>. The medicine is popularly referred to as a blood tonic and helps to fortify the body, particularly in conditions like anemia. The drive to keep up with the production of premium *Ejiao* tonic, led to China's interest in importing donkey skins from African countries to cover up the huge gap. The high demand in the exportation of donkey hides to China has been beneficial to livestock sellers in Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. <File://sys-18/users/public.-Donkey-Meat> In Nigeria, Niger and Burkina Faso, nearly 65, 000 donkey skins were exported to China in the first six months of 2016 and it doubled by 2019. The search for donkey hides in Nigeria took the Chinese to a donkey market known as *Jeki* in Ezamgbo market, in Ebonyi State in Southeastern Nigeria. Donkey hide is called *Jeki* in Ebonyi and the market was abysmally low until recently when the Chinese took interest in the trade in Ebonyi State. <File://sys-18/users/public.-Donkey-Meat>

Chinese do not usually visit donkey markets themselves (especially those that are in northern Nigeria) but rather send their agents to buy donkey skins and took them to places where they are gathered for transportation by sea from Lagos/Port Harcourt. Abubakar, (2020) <sup>[10]</sup>. An informant confirmed that Chinese began involvement in buying donkey skin trade in the late 2014 and early 2015. Before the coming of Chinese traders from south-south and southeast, people bought donkey hides for consumption only. But with the coming of Chinese who buy the hides at expensive rate; with time people stopped consuming it because of its high monetary value. Therefore, merchants realised that they rather sell it to Chinese and buy something else with the proceeds. Correspondent also added that donkey hide has no specific price. But they usually sell one kilogram of the skin at the rate of N11, 000 up to N60, 000 because they sell the skin in kilograms. Abubakar, (2020) <sup>[10]</sup>. There is observation on the selling of donkey skins after measuring it with the scale. Dried skin and fresh ones are sold at the donkey markets. The dried donkey hide is higher in weight and is more expensive. It can be sold between N45, 000.00 and N50, 000.00, while fresh one could be sold between N35, 000. 00 and N40, 000.00. Many youths are involved in the processes of softening the skins; others are gathering the fresh ones and measuring them with scale. Ahmad, (2020) <sup>[11]</sup>

The trade in donkey hides in Africa by the Chinese has helped some donkey sellers economically not just in Nigeria but also in other African countries. China's huge appetite for donkeys has created opportunities that exporters can benefit from with careful planning because of the steady demand for the gelatin extracted from donkey skin. Chinese demand for donkey skin was expected to increase with a growing consumer class willing to spend on *ejiao*. Emanuel, (2017) <sup>[6]</sup>. Donkey trade has enhanced trade partnership between African countries and China. Chinese were/are increasingly looking to Africa to boost its stocks so as to export donkey hides from countries across the continent. A Chinese diplomat confirmed that donkey skin was used for medicine in China, but the embassy seems unaware and how far their nation has penetrated the economy of Nigeria for buying donkey skin and transfer to China. Emanuel, (2017) <sup>[6]</sup>.

It was discovered recently that, Chinese merchants had interest in donkey skin, which was tied directly to the movement en masse of the animal's skin from the northern parts of Nigeria to China. Donkey population is dwindling because it is not bred in large number by any farm or organisation and faced too much exportation from northern parts of the country to many places either for consumption or for seeking the animal's skin. <www.Chinese-Medicine-Fuelling-Rise-in-Donkeys> People are seeking donkey skin blindly, this was in connection with the hiking of its price since a big one could be sold up to N50, 000.00. In Ezamgbo and Mararrabah donkey markets many skins are sold at the rate of N50, 000.00. A new dimension has developed in donkey trade where live donkey traders could sell the animals with the exclusion of the skin to people who slaughter it and sold its meat. Then after that, the skin will be returned to those donkey traders who also sell to Chinese agents at very exorbitant price that could range between N48, 000.00 and N52, 000.00 (it depends on the size of donkey). Eluodin, (2020). See picture below:



Source: The Triumph News Paper, 2017

Fig 1: Donkey skin ready for export

Apart from the skin, donkey milk was used up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a replacement for cow milk in some countries in the world like China. Donkey milk could substitute breast nursing for infants because it is the closest milk to human milk in biochemical composition. <http://edition.cnn.com-Chinese-Need-Donkey>

China served as the final destination where the skins are exported and sold at very good prices at the equivalent of N30, 000.00 in January, 2016 and by December, 2019 it reached between N40, 000.00 and N60, 000. Some donkey traders are not mindful of any donkey type because the main concern is the skin not the meat. Thus, traders are making more money from sick donkeys for selling of their skins as their prices are lesser than healthy ones. Tijjani, (2020). The awareness of the demand is creating a large market, inevitably, paving way for unprecedented smuggling of the animals in demand for skin. There was an instance recently in Illela market in Sokoto State where a Chinese man came to Illela market to buy a cow. And he was told that its price was between N100, 000 and N120, 000, he then went to donkey section where he saw the very big donkey and its price was N50, 000. The man quickly paid for donkey and said that ‘the meat could replace meat’, why should he bother himself in buying the cow with higher price, since he can obtain donkey with lower amount of money and would also provide the necessary protein needed instead of taking a cow meat. Abubakar, (2020) <sup>[10]</sup>.

One of the Chinese agents, explained that there are many Chinese merchants that involved in buying and selling of donkey skins; they are found in many places in Nigeria seeking for the skin. He added that it was around 2013 that the Chinese began to come to Nigeria for buying the skin which they ship to China. Tijjani, (2020). The Chinese have many warehouses in Nigeria such as Lagos, Calabar and Ibadan where they gather the skins and transfer to China. Since around 2013 it was sold at N3, 000.00 and later reached N50, 000.00 (Late December, 2018 and January 20120. Boss, interview, (2020). Informant added that Chinese confirmed that there is every tendency that the skin could reach up to N100, 000.00 by 2020. Tijjani, (2020). James expressed that Chinese began involvement in the trade around 2012-2013. They started buying donkey skin at low amount but later unexpectedly rose up to such amount. He also confirmed the development of new issue in the trade, whereby traders could sell meat of donkey with the exception of the skin of such donkey will be returned to a trader after it was slaughtered and butchered. So therefore, a trader could also sell the skin to Chinese agent. Boss, (2020).

Many people in Ebonyi, State and other southeastern states of Nigeria have found safe havens in the business of importing the animals from northern parts of the country, slaughter and export the skin to China. Wealthy people in Ebonyi, State, and other states around the southeastern region of Nigeria have noted the uses of donkey skin. They are involved in the trade and dominated the weaker ones; hence it is no longer within the reach of the poor. Boss, (2020). Chinese businessmen (through their agents) control the *Jeki* market in Ezamgbo, where they bought donkey skins in large quantities and ship to China. The skins are converted to raw materials for making of different medicinal products. Also agents of Chinese are scattered around Ohaukwu Local Government Area, Ebonyi State to buy donkey skin which is sold at the rate of N24, 000.00 per piece as at September, 2016. But the price of the skin is now hiked and had reached up to N50, 000.00 as at December, 2020. Irughe, (2020).

Donkey trade is a money spinner, not only the meat generates revenue for both the state and local governments in Nigeria. The skin is by far the most lucrative as it plays the same role as an income generating commodity. Nuan, (2020). Another source indicated that selling of the skin plays an important role in gaining profit since Chinese demand for the skin is on increase. Hence, they could buy it at any price. The skin was formerly consumed; people boil and stew it and made it ready for consumption but its medicinal importance was later observed by Chinese who developed the idea of turning it into medicinal products. Isioma, (2021). As at December, 2016 Chinese were on their peak in searching for the skin. This, therefore, led people to stop consuming it because its price is hiked or rather there are few people who could buy it for immediate consumption. The price of the skin fluid and therefore has no fixed price. Its price has been changing as at early 2016, the skin was sold at N10,000.00 and within a week (ending of October 2016) it reached N30,000.00 and today (first week of November, 2019), the price of the skin has risen up to the N40,000.00 and in early 2020 it rose up to N60,000.00 or N70, 000.00 before it has dropped because of the Corona pandemic that affected almost every sector of the economy and forced the Chinese to stop coming to buy the product, but in the early 2021 there was indication that price of the skin remains stable as it was before the outbreak of the Corona. Isioma, (2021).

It is confirmed that Chinese merchants have interest in donkey hide, which is directly related to the movement en masse of the animals from the northern parts of Nigeria to other places. Even the southerner’s involvement in the trade is largely because of the Chinese merchants. Most times, Chinese buyers gave them huge amount of money to buy the animals on their behalf. After they slaughter the animals they also ship the animal skins to Lagos where they have a special warehouse upon which the hide and skin will be exported by sea to China for processing into various products. Emanuel, (2016) <sup>[6]</sup>.

### 3. Use of Gelatin /Ejiao Extracted from Donkey Skin

Donkey hide is boiled, soaked and stewed to produce donkey hide gelatin or Ass hide glue (latin *collacorriasini*). Gelatin is a key ingredient in a medicine called *ejiao* that further contributed to the price increase of Ass-hide and the rate of slaughter of donkeys. Gelatin extracted from donkey hides is used to manufacture a traditional medicine called *ejiao*. The medicine is prescribed for treating anemia, sleeplessness and excessive menstrual bleeding, among other ailments. The



gelatin is produced in several coastal provinces of China like; Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shandong, etc. <https://www.donkeysanctuary.org>. Shandong's Donge County is a place where "ejiao" got its name. *Ejiao* is either prepared as gelatin or mixed with powdered oyster shell or pollen to form glue balls. It tastes sweet and it is used for several different types of treatments. A quantity of 5 to 10 grams may be dissolved in hot water ingredients in the traditional Chinese material medicate taken alone. The medicine is used for the cure of a variety of conditions including bleeding, insomnia, dry-cough, etc. <https://www.donkeysanctuary.org>.

Donkey hide contains gelatin which is claimed to be of value for medicinal purposes. Gelatin also have anti -aging properties; is also able to treat insomnia and the improvement of blood circulation. The gelatin is a key ingredient in China's *ejiao* industry, which produces tablets, tonics and a sweet syrup. Donkeys have become a converted resource in China, which has struggled to maintain its own population, and requires gelatin from hides for the traditional medicine *ejiao*. Gelatin is a special item extracted from donkey. African countries namely; Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria have been exporting this special part of donkey hides to China. [www.Donkey-Hide-Gelatin.org](http://www.Donkey-Hide-Gelatin.org)

#### 4. Development of Donkey Skin Trade and Its Implications in Nigeria

The trade in donkey hides has become profitable to livestock sellers who mostly are abandoning other livestock trade for donkey trade. A donkey cost between 100 USD and 145 USD, when in recent years it cost only 34 USD. The trade has rapidly developed in the southern part of Nigeria. Thus, the changing nature of the trade has reached the extent of linking some southerners with foreigners like Chinese who vigorously buy the skin in large number. People are gaining a lot of money and even banks could lend huge amounts of money to dealers of donkey because they knew within a short time they could earn profit and pay back the money. <https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk>.

The major reason for thriving of the donkey trade was the involvement of Chinese people in the trade where they buy donkey skins in Nigeria in huge quantity and convey to China for medicinal purposes. The animal has become more expensive beyond expectations and is fast becoming very hard to get. Donkey trade has become an important occupation that people could sustain their lives on. James, (2021). In Mararrabah Idah donkey market and other places where donkey is sold there is attraction of large number of participants who are involved in the value-chain of the trade which was occasioned by Chinese insatiable interest that made the price exorbitant. Prior to the enrollment of Chinese in donkey trade, it was hard for a donkey trader to sell ten (10) donkeys in the market per day but with the involvement of Chinese agents in every market day which is either Sunday or Monday about ten to fifteen trucks could arrive in the market with about 300 donkeys. The consignment is usually sold and slaughtered and the skins of those slaughtered will be sold to Chinese agents. Certainly people are making money because of the hike in the price of donkey hide. A person could earn a profit of N5, 000.00 to N20, 000.00 for selling one donkey. Mamman, (2021).

The demand for donkey hides is outstripping supply. Around 1.8 million donkey hides are traded per year, while global demand is estimated between 4 million to 10 million skins.

Consequently the price of donkeys in some countries jumped and made, making them unaffordable for many people who use them for transportation, agricultural purposes and fetching of water including other uses. Enugu, (2016). Countries with large donkey population also reported an increase in their slaughter. Illegal or bush slaughter, which frequently involves stolen donkeys have become rampant in many African countries. [www.MassacreDonkeys-http://nspca.co-za/](http://www.MassacreDonkeys-http://nspca.co-za/).

The trade is poorly regulated and has drawn condemnation from welfare groups following reports of massive donkeys slaughter in illegal places. The trade has further encouraged cases of skinned carcasses being found dumped in remote areas. The growing trade and demand of donkey and its hide, including its potential effects on global donkey population and their welfare has led to many incidences of theft of donkeys and brutal killings by using hammers and knives to mercilessly kill donkeys for the extraction of gelatin. Enugu, (2016).

The demand for the donkey skin has also brought about huge shortfalls in the number of donkeys especially to those people that rely on donkey power. For instance, in Italy alone almost 6,000 donkeys are now farmed for their milk. Also in China Million of donkeys are farmed for their skins to produce a medicinal gelatin (*ejiao*) which is traded as traditional Chinese medicine. This is why the donkey population in China and other countries in the world is dwindling. This led some countries to ban the exportation of donkeys from their countries. [www.Kyrgyz-Concerns-About-Donkey-Exports.org](http://www.Kyrgyz-Concerns-About-Donkey-Exports.org).

The demand for donkey skins looks to be substantial and extends beyond China, potentially posing an immediate threat to many donkey dependent communities in the world. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *ejiao* manufactures experienced problems with the supply of genuine donkey hides, as fewer people raise these animals these days. This led to greatly increased prices of donkey and its hide beyond expectations. <http://nspca.co-za/Massacre-Donkeys>.

Consequently, in response to this deepening donkey meat and skin trade between a number of African and some Asian countries, the African donkey population in the last few years has been terribly decimated. The negative effect of the trade as it will continue to pose adverse implications on African farmers. The continent would increasingly lose its beast of burden, which for generations has been serving as means of transport for agricultural goods. Donkeys have been suffering cruelty by different stake holders. It is noted that individuals and communities are suffering as their livelihoods or often their means of transportation are being taken away from them or sold for money. <http://www.ibtims.com-Slaughter-House-One/Kenya>

The trade operation has recently recorded a setback of banning the exportation of donkeys to other neighbouring countries like some countries in North African continent who issued ban to prevent the decimation of the donkey population in African countries. Niger and Burkina Faso did the same. Such African countries were worried about their donkeys because the demand for donkey skin has reached worrying levels. For instance, in Niger Republic a source indicated that over 80,000 donkeys have been exported which was against previous years when 27,000 donkeys were exported. <https://en.wikipedia.org-Struggle-for-Buying-Donkey>. Most of the donkeys that were slaughtered in southeast and south-south of Nigeria are imported from Niger Republic through Illela border market in Sokoto State, Jibiya

in Katsina State, Maigatari in Jigawa State, etc. Hence, the Chinese followed the same route to buy the skins of donkeys for exportation to China. Many traders both in the south and the northern parts of Nigeria were not happy with this development that led to the closure of Niger/Nigerian border and banning of donkey importation into Nigeria which later resulted in the scarcity of donkeys and their price increased beyond expectations. Yusuf and Uzonma (2016).

Most of the donkeys seen in Sokoto State livestock markets are exported by road from Niger/Nigerian border through Gada, Illela, Tangaza and Sabon-Birni towns illegally. Traders assigned 'Yankora' (boys assigned to chase the animals out to the targeted borders) to push and export such donkeys by walking on their foot down to Kwanni town, then from there such donkeys would be loaded in vehicles for onward transportation to Illela market and other markets in Sokoto State. Along the route of donkey exportation from Niger Republic many obstacles were encountered especially from Nigerien Customs who were vehemently blockading the exporting of such donkeys but according to some allegations if traders met Nigerian Police the issue could be settled through negotiation by giving the Police some amount of money to allow the exportation of the animals. Balarabe (2021).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper tried to study changing nature and development of donkey trade for many years. The trade in donkey in recent years has different dynamics which could be seen as the major reasons that enhanced the trade operations and resulted in the massive enrolment of different people in the trade. One of the very important issues that played a role in the development of the trade recently was the involvement of the Chinese who require donkey skin by processing it into medicinal products that cures many ailments and increases the health of the human body. Donkey population is shrinking in China and elsewhere and there is the need to meet up the demand. This further compelled them to move to African countries where the animals are available. The increased demand for donkey skin by the Chinese has contributed to the development of the trade and led to the hiking of the animal's price in Nigeria and some African countries like Niger and Burkina Faso.

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