

# Habari

Newsletter of the Center for African Studies - University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

Spring 2021



## Center Celebrates 50 years

### Director's Note

Greetings to our community of friends from everyone at the Center for African Studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Because we are all still in the Covid era this is a virtual greeting, and we can't invite and welcome you to our office in the International Studies Building as we wish we could! But we all have hopes for better days.

On October 7, CAS celebrated two milestone events: the 50th anniversary of the Center's founding in 1970, and the launch of the Prof. Eyamba Bokamba Graduate Scholarship fund. Organized in conjunction with LAS Alumni Affairs, the celebration began with a slide show of some of the Center's many highlights over the years.

Then an illustrious group of past directors, old friends and alumni of the Center offered their perspectives on the Center's history and ideas for its future trajectory. As it was a virtual event, there were participants from places as far-flung as Kenya, Burkina Faso, California, New Mexico and Missouri.

The Bokamba Fund was launched with remarks by members of the Bokamba family, and the first scholarship was awarded to Ms. Fatou Jobe, a CAS MA student. Speakers included Profs. Charles Stewart, Alex Winter-Nelson, Merle Bowen, Assata Zerai, Al Kagan, Jean Allman and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza. Alumni and friends included Batamaka Some, Nathaniel Moore, Anna Henry and Maimouna Barro. Both Prof. and Mrs. Bokamba gave short remarks, and were introduced by their daughter, Ms. Eyenga Bokamba, and by Prof. James Yoon of UIUC Linguistics.

With best wishes,

Terri Barnes

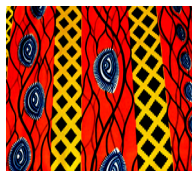
See page 16 for photos

### Appreciating Students

Due to the quarantine we were unable to publicly recognize our students and African Studies affiliated students to let them know how very much we appreciate their contributions to the center. On May 22 via Zoom, the Center organized a student appreciation gathering in which we were able to

celebrate graduates and others.

See inside photos.



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## A Bright Béninois Future

Tyler Funk

A nation like Benin has finite resources that it can allocate for investment. Should policy makers focus on accumulation of tangible assets or improve the quality of labor? Where will you reduce spending to expand your economic program? Can such programs be evaluated through a randomized control trial? These are the types of questions Professor Akresh asked our class to consider throughout our experiences in Benin.

Among countless other events, the two-week economic development course in Benin featured visits to a number of agricultural enterprises, health centers, the International Voodoo Festival, and a meeting with the US Ambassador. We also had the opportunity to visit a Peace Corps health services volunteer, Lexie, and esteemed professors Dr. Enoch Achigan-Dako and Dr. Brice Sinsin at the University of Abomey-Calavi. Immediately upon entering the country, our group was thoroughly engaged with Benin, and more importantly the Béninois.

It was Benin's human capital that was most impressive as I think about our time there. Beyond the intelligence and skill our economic development class would appreciate, we found the Béninois to be generous and rich in culture. We attended so many welcoming ceremonies and celebrations, we were all connoisseurs of Béninois dance by the end of the trip. Apart from their welcoming nature, there was a magnetism in the way the people spoke. The seamless transition between French and Fon exemplifies the beauty of the Béninois patois. The opportunity to appreciate Béninois food, culture, and people was ever present. This was particularly true when we had the good fortune to meet Béninois university students.

Our interactions with students at the University of Abomey-Calavi and African School of Economics were certainly the most cherished experiences of the trip. Meeting these students transcended the Béninois youth from components in a productivity growth function into what I hope are lifelong friends. The motivations and passions that fuel Benin's development became apparent through our interactions. Some students aspire to research the usefulness of monetary independence while others are committed to improving the nation's constitution and justice system. We were introduced to several graduate students dedicated to advancements in agricultural science and undergrads at the Titi Gweti English Club I am confident will author great works of Béninois literature. The students and their motivations are diverse and unique. In meeting them, one grows confident in Benin's future.

The Benin trip gave our group the unique opportunity to experience the mechanics of development firsthand. Moreover, Professor Akresh successfully reinforced the human element in economic development. We met students our age who have only experienced modern Benin and older individuals who lived through French colonization, post-colonial instability, a socialist republic, and now a government based on constitutional liberalism. We sought to learn about the diverse experiences of the Béninois and recognized a hunger for economic, educational, and political growth in their country.

Professor Akresh has spent much of his adult life researching the economics of developing countries and clearly has a deep affection for West Africa. After the two weeks we spent together in Benin, I am confident in speaking for the class when I say that the course has instilled in us the early stages of similar sentiments. We gained an appreciation for developing countries' need for investment in infrastructure, early childhood education, and public health. The prospect of a career engaged in these concerns was presented as an attractive proposition.

I will forever treasure the time our group spent bouncing down dirt roads in the sixteen-seater with our trusted chauffeur Bienvenu, who we all grew quite fond of, and our debates on the superiority of Togolaise or Béninoise beer.

