

FREE TRADE IN THE PRECOLONIAL ERA

Implications for the implementation of the African
Continental Free Trade Area in Cameroon

November 2024

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Introduction

The quest to eliminate extreme poverty, hunger, food insecurity, gender inequalities, corruption, poor governance, and trade barriers has always been a priority for many development agendas in Africa and the world (Wonnacott, 1996). As measures to achieve inclusive and sustainable socioeconomic growth and development among nations take central stage in various national and regional agendas, several political, economic, and social integration programs have been undertaken to prioritize growth in Africa (Mlambo et al., 2022). The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is one of the flagship programs that has been undertaken by the African Union (AU) to achieve agenda 2063 on the “Africa we want”. The AfCFTA was adopted in 2012, and the agreement was signed during the 10th extraordinary session of the AU Head of States Assembly by 44 African States. The operational phase of AfCFTA was then launched during the 12th extraordinary session of the AU Assembly in 2021.

AfCFTA, a flagship program of the African Union, is regarded as the world’s largest free trade area, bringing together the 55 countries of the African Union (AU) and eight (8) Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to create a single market for the continent. The aim is to enable the free flow of goods and services across the continent and boost intra-African trade in value-added production across all sectors, establish regional value chains in Africa, encourage investment and job creation, and foster industrialization in all sectors of the African economy. One of its key strategies is to build networks and distribution channels for Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and startups, recognizing their potential to drive economic growth. It also has the potential to lift 30 million people out of poverty and generate \$ 450 million by 2035 (AfCFTA Secretariat, 2023). Implementing AfCFTA in Cameroon, with its promise of a common market and the free movement of persons, goods, and services, could significantly benefit the country. This study, therefore, aims to explore the practice of free trade during the pre-colonial era in Cameroon to inform the successful implementation of AfCFTA.

Background

Studies have shown that Africa countries are still to develop innovative strategies that will make the continent flourish in terms of sustainable growth and development (UNCTAD, 2021). This is largely due to weak intra-African trade which hinder African countries from reaping the benefits that comes from full market integration like increased income, investment, government revenue and employment opportunities. The share of Africa's trade to world trade in 2019 stood at 2.8%, with intra-regional trade representing only 14.4% of global African trade in 2019 (UNCTAD, 2021). Farahane and Heshmati (2020) studied the relationship between trade and economic growth in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) between 2005 and 2017 using a panel data technique. They found that an increase in exports will expand economic growth. This implies that Intra-African trade will improve inflow and outflow of commodities among member states and shall be a fundamental pillar of sustainable and inclusive economic growth and a springboard of infrastructural development, regional integration, industrialization, and job creation for youth and women within the African continent in general and Cameroon in particular.

Only a few studies have documented the lessons learned from the precolonial trade and the growth of the African continent (Aswani & Sheppard, 2003; Oka & Kusimba, 2008; and Fuglestad, 2018). Contemporary extant literature on intra-African trade shows that African trade is fragile and faces several challenges (Kamuganga, 2012). For instance, intra-African trade contributes only 10% to global trade compared to intra-trade in Latin America and Asia, which contributes 22% and 50% to global trade (Anyanwu, 2014). AfCFTA has been recognized as a new continental game changer since it can potentially increase Africa's share of the global trade position to a level where it can compete with other international markets. African countries must implement policies that promote peace and security, good governance and democracy, free movement of people, and reduced fiscal deficits (Fofack, 2020). According to the World Bank (2020), the AfCFTA could increase regional income by 7% and accelerate growth in the wages of skilled and unskilled workers (10.3% and 9.8% respectively).

One country that served as a hub or epicentre for trade during the precolonial period is Cameroon, a Central African state linking many countries. Before the German role in Cameroon in 1884, free trade was practiced between the different communities and clans through the barter system, where goods and services were exchanged, including slaves. European traders who came after Fernão do Pó (the first European explorer to view the Cameroon coast) mostly carried out free trade in Africa using the barter system. Enslaved people were traded in Bimbia, Douala, and other major ports (Lewis et al., 2023). By the early 1800s, the slave trade had declined, marking a significant transition to rubber, palm oil, and other products (Benneh & DeLancey, 2023). Archaeologists, academicians, and social scientists recognize ancient trade as symbolic and part of the historical pattern of precolonial trade.

Cameroon, often referred to as 'Africa in miniature' due to its rich natural, cultural and linguistic diversity, is a fascinating subject for the study of precolonial trade. Exploring the precolonial economy of Cameroon, including the mechanisms and economic exchanges between different actors, provides valuable insights into intra-African free trade. Understanding the mechanisms of precolonial trade in Cameroon involves questioning the rules established for exchanges, the various products and objects exchanged, and the means of exchange put in place.

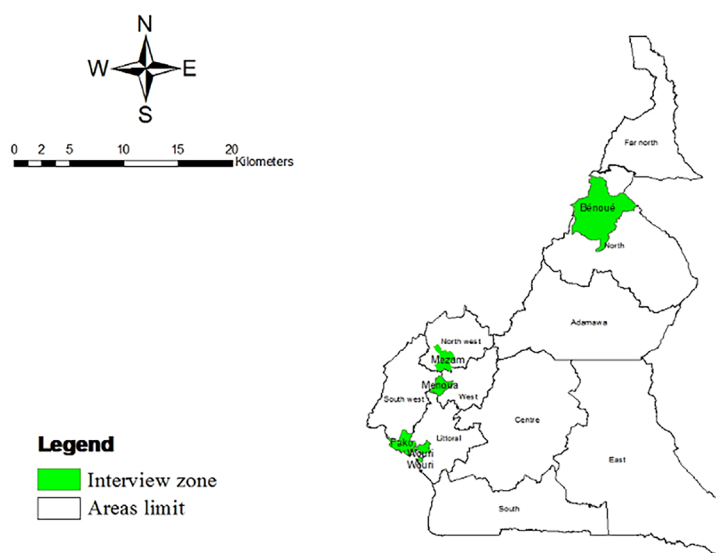
Aim: To study the practice of free trade during the pre-colonial era in Cameroon to use the knowledge gained to inform the implementation of AfCFTA.

Methodology

We used a multi-perspective qualitative research approach incorporating multiple perspectives from key informant interviews and focus group discussion with traditional leaders and expert webinar panel discussions with erudite historians and politicians who have excellent knowledge of precolonial trade in Cameroon. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of individuals or groups by integrating related individuals' perspectives into empirical research and building multiple perspectives to gain insights into different viewpoints and experiences, thereby enhancing the validity and credibility of the research findings.

Study site and design

Five key regions in Cameroon, including, Northwest, West, Southwest, Littoral, and North were selected for the studies. These were selected based on literature review and historical information about their active engagement in trade activities during the precolonial era. Cameroon is a multilingual country with over 270 indigenous languages and the country is divided into ten regions (Ngouo, 2022). Despite the plethora of indigenous languages, Cameroon has two official languages, which are English, and French instituted by the colonial masters (Britain and France) since independence (Ngouo, 2022). The five regions considered for this study were purposely selected taking into considerations the country's geographical, religious, and linguistic differences. Villages in Cameroon are governed traditionally by a leader referred to as the chief or fon with each of them controlling a defined geographical area and people collectively referred to as chiefdom or fondom. Within the five regions under consideration, we purposely selected at least one chiefdom per region that was involved in precolonial trade in Cameroon and these include Mankon, Fossong Wentcheng, Bimbia, Douala, and Tcheboa (Austen 1983; Warnier 2012 and Britannica). To further enrich the data, we also organized two expert panel discussions involving erudite historians and politicians who have excellent knowledge of precolonial trade in Cameroon. This methodological triangulation allowed the data generated to provide a more profound and nuanced understanding of precolonial trade in Cameroon. Many authors, including Carr (2010) and Burton (2012) have advocated for this approach because it stimulates theories that have more explanatory power and reality.



Selection of participants and data collections

Advanced Official letters, including the project concept note, were sent to the chiefs of the selected chiefdoms seeking their consent to participate in a focus group discussion on precolonial trade in Cameroon. The chiefs were allowed to choose the date, time, and place for the focus group discussions. They were also allowed to select between 8-10 collaborators (also known as king's men) with substantial knowledge about slave trade. Also, key informants (experts), senior researchers, economists, university lecturers, and politicians who have published scholarly research on precolonial trade in Cameroon were invited to participate in an online webinar panel discussion. The panelists were selected, taking into consideration their gender, language and years of experience. Each of the webinars had four panelists and a moderator. The decision to participate in either the focus group discussion or the webinar panel discussion was voluntary. Participants confirmed their participation either orally or in writing. All five focus group discussions and two-panel discussions conducted from January 2023 to April 2023. During each session, permission was taken to record the conversation. Considering the bilingual nature of Cameroon, the interviews were conducted in English and French, depending on the language preference of the respondent. We also had interpreters who translated issues raised in local languages.

An interview guide containing open-ended questions served as the basis for the discussions, and the responses obtained were examined in depth. All the respondents enjoyed relative flexibility in talking, and digressions, to some extent, was tolerated. The participants had the right not to answer questions they deemed emotional, sensitive, inappropriate, or out of context that could affect them in one way or the other. Each focus group discussion and webinar lasted an average of 1 hour, 30 minutes. All the interviews were conducted until saturation when no new information emerged. For the webinars, questions were also entertained from the audience online. Interview notes were taken during each session, including audiovisual recordings for transcription. Fictitious names were attached to each participant following Bulmer's (1982) advice regarding privacy and confidentiality in research. There was no disclosure of the interviewees' location or address; the data collected was saved, passworded, and used for the study only.

Data analysis and reporting

Thematic data analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used. Both inductive and deductive thematic analysis approaches were used to allow the data to speak for itself. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and studied in detail with field notes after every interview. Two researchers analyzed the data using Nvivo version 12 to generate codes. The data and the codes were read repeatedly to help identify missing or latent codes. Similar codes were merged to form sub-themes that had better describe the study and research questions. Similar sub-themes were then merged to get higher-level patterns or themes that are broader and more coherent, focusing on a specific idea but still retaining their natural meanings on precolonial trade in Cameroon. Repeated reading of the data was done to ensure the information captured is accurate and represents the data without missing important information while also considering non-verbal cues. Some participants are quoted verbatim in the results section using fictitious names. Where information was unclear, the participants were contacted for clarification.

Findings

Five focus groups were organized between January-April 2023 in 5 different chiefdoms selected across five regions. Table 1 below shows the different chiefdoms, and the characteristics of the participants. Also, two expert panel discussion (webinars) were organized within the same period.

Table 1. Table shows the different chiefdoms where focus groups were conducted.

Location	Age	Male	Female	Total
Bimbia in the southwest Region of Cameroon	35-85	5	2	7
Lamido of Tcheboa in the North region	18-90	7	3	10
MankonFondom in the Northwest	17-85	8	4	12
Bonaberi Douala in the Littoral region	40-70	5	1	6
Fossong-Wentcheng in the west region	50-80	6	3	9

Source: The authors

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes generated

Themes	Sub-themes
Modus Operandi of Precolonial Trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade by barter (Goods/services exchange for goods/services) • Slave trade
Instruments and Actors of the Game	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selling of kola nuts and gold • Translation services • Explorers, miners, slave traders • Foreigners • Missionaries and religious books • marriage alliances
Rules and regulations of Precolonial trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust and honesty • Business between the masters and the slave and the master is supreme. • Equality in value of items
Challenges Encounter in Precolonial Trade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Culture and tradition • Portability of commodities and products • Absence of an exact currency for trade • Poor roads networks

Source: The authors

Modus operandi of precolonial trade

The participants in the interview believed that free trade in the precolonial era was both internal (chiefdoms) and external (African and European countries). Findings equally revealed that the different categories of economic exchanges between trade actors or parties, and several products were at the heart of the issues. The operation of precolonial trade in the western region of Cameroon

was both domestic and foreign trade with domestic trade carried out amongst villagers and other chiefdoms, and international trade between the people and other trade countries like Nigeria, and Gabon. Barter was a system involves the direct exchange of goods and services for other goods and services without the use of any legal tender or currency. This was the earliest form of trade and exchange and believed to have possessed both practical and symbolic significance between different individuals, chiefdoms, and countries. As revealed by the fun of Fossong-Wentcheng

“We had trade links with different communities and even countries like Nigeria, Garbon, Guinea our closest neighbor. They came in in their numbers with different things to exchange with our own traders. Some people came with yams, garri, fish in exchange for food stuff like plantain, bananas, which they don't have” (Dampa, 89 years male).

In Bamenda the present-day capital city of Northwest region “many people came from Calabar with salt and supplements in exchange of plantains, bananas and even palm oil” (Tabi, 78 yers female)

Therefore, we traded but have to also know that before even 1984 we did not have trade boundaries, we never had territorial boundaries demarcating Cameroon and other countries that we now have the names today. So, trade was done beyond bounds” February 5 2023 1:45pm, Mankon-Bamenda.

Douala, acted as the intermediaries for international trade, which was further done internally with the various chiefdoms, and externally with countries like Nigeria, Gabon, Fernão do Pó, Congo, Europeans and products like plantains, palm oil, and other products were traded in the various markets. Participants in Bimbia and Mankon reveal that trade was also done with the exchange of humans.

“Pre-colonial trade orchestrated trade, which was called the trans-African slave trade, and that is how they came over here. Induced our chiefs along the coast. It's not only in Cameroon, along the coast of West Africa they came with you know, certain matters to deceive our parents of those days and our parents had to engage in this illegal or wicked trade that you send your brother to go and work. Deceiving that you're going to work there and get money, but they were going there for slavery” (Jubam 88 years male)

The findings from the focus group discussion with the various traditional authorities show sufficient evidence that precolonial trade in most African countries and Cameroon was done internally and externally. Food items like plantains, palm oil, and other products were the major commodities traded using the barter system and the exchange of slaves. These findings are further confirmed by the results of Sama, (2014) in an article entitled “Precolonial Cameroon”, which demonstrates that trade in precolonial Cameroon started with the Portuguese in 1472, who explore Fernão do Pó and were the first amongst the European powers to visit the Cameroonian coast.

Instruments and actors involved during precolonial trade

As per the commodities that were traded in the precolonial Cameroon, a participant from the focus group discussion in Bimbia disclose that the types of items traded varied significantly. While most of the items traded locally were predominantly focused on food items, traders, missionaries and colonizers were predominantly focusing on cash crops and other types of minerals (raw materials)

“Portuguese were the first to land in Cameroon on the coastline. They landed in Bimbia, Douala, and were the first to come here to do trading with us. They came here to look for raw materials for their industries back home in Europe. When the industrial revolution came up, they knew that they had to get raw materials; they wanted rubber, cocoa, and bananas. They came over this way and they started establishing plantations” (Babana 82 years male).

Fernão do Pó's arrival in Cameroon at the beginning of the 400-year trading relationship between the Portuguese and the local chiefs in Cameroon and other African countries like Nigeria. In addition, results from respondent #1 unveil the fact that apart from the Portuguese that came, Dutch, Germans, English, and French who highly took part in the Atlantic slave trade in Cameroon, and Fernão do Pó was an important reserve of slaves, many of whom were sold and traded from Bimbia, Douala, and other ports such as Tiko. Roads connected these ports to the hinterland, and clans like the Bamilekes, Bamoums, and some other kingdoms provided more slaves as revealed by other focus group discussions in Fossong-Wentcheng. In the early 1800s, the trade in rubber, palm oil, and other products gradually replaced the slave trade. The Germans, British, and French substituted the control of the Portuguese and Dutch.

Currencies

The problem of currencies in precolonial trade in Cameroon has not been sufficiently studied. Currencies of exchange are less known in Cameroonian historiography, especially since during this period there was not a single currency for all economic actors, whether African or European. Money is what is globally accepted to be a means of exchange, store value, and standard for different payments and for the settlement of debts. As compared to ancient trade, today it is carried out through a medium of exchange, which we call money. In those days, the medium of exchange as far as trade was concerned was in the form of trade by barter system. As disclosed in the focus group discussion with Lamido

“He said there was only barter. As an example, he took that in this precolonial period, the cap he himself has on his head, as soon as he goes to the market and he needs another product like Kola, he exchanges with the one who has Kola. It can be some cereal helmet against his cap and whatever. There was no currency” February 13, 2023, 3:05pm, Douala.

In addition, in the focus group discussion in Bimbia, a participant expressed the fact that during precolonial trade the medium of exchange was by barter.

“You bring me a quantity of what I want, then I bring you a quantity of what you want and two of us look at it. I value my own and then you value your own and then we agree that I can give you what I have and take what you have and you agree on taking what I have and giving me what you have. That is what we call batter at that time. There was no monetary value for exchange it was the batter. But it was later during the colonial era that the West came in and they established what is called money which is a legal tender. We started using the Dutch mark after the Germans were defeated the British came in with the pound shillings and penny” February 13, 2023, 3:05pm, Douala.

Actors in the business transaction

The major actors of trade in the precolonial period were traders, families, and kingdoms who made a fortune from trade. A participant in the focus group discussion in Bimbia reveal that there were some actors who benefited from precolonial trade

“I would say my great-grandfather named Makundu who was called “dick merchant” was one of the beneficiaries of trade. Then I will give you the name of the chief of Bonabile, Bile Losengue, the chief of Bonabile was one, he became a very wealthy man because of that slave trade business, and Nakoh, the chief of Bonangombe. They benefitted from the trade and that is why even after the abolition of the slave trade they still stubbornly resisted and continued with the trade because they knew what

they were getting from it” February 5 2023 1:35pm, Mankon-Bamenda. In addition, they further reveals that the “Chiefs and their notables were the main actors and were the direct beneficiaries of free trade in precolonial Cameroon” February 5 2023 1:36pm, Mankon-Bamenda.

In addition, a participant in the focus group discussion in Dschang further disclosed that the benefits of trade were not for all the villagers but for those that were able to participate in trade

“In reality, it wasn’t the whole village. The village had its merchants and it was these traders who carried out these economic relations. Not everyone went to Nigeria. There is a set of people who went to Nigeria who traded and came back to share the fruits of trade with everything else” February 5 2023 1:37pm, Mankon-Bamenda.

In the Mankon clan, a participant in the focus group discussion discloses that trade was done to improve welfare amongst the people since most of the people were involved in hunting, trapping, and farming activities. The fon further reveals,

“Trade was not really an established occupation at the time. Most people in the village at the time were hunters and farmers and they had few items that they depended on. So, most people mostly made, they traveled from distant places to get a few items to improve their daily intake. Some families in Mankon, like the Ndifonbi, the AwasumChelam, and a host of the Senora family in Tangem were noted for trading” March 7, 2023 12:33pm, West Region.

From the findings of the various traditional rulers, many actors benefited from the trade

Rules and regulations governing precolonial trade

Ancient trade in Cameroon respected a set of rules and regulations set by the key actors of trade. While it can be said that trade along the Cameroonian coast and within the country was unequal in terms of the types of products traded and their quality, it is important to note that there were rules of the game.

“There were weekly markets and there were sporadic markets. For example, when a trader comes with these products, and there the other small traders and medium traders came to refuel, in case it is an opportunity, that is sporadic. There were also, the days that we knew were the days of the market” March 7, 2023 12:37pm, West Region. The findings reveal that specific days were set aside as market days, where villagers were not allowed to go to the farm and as such, any person that goes to the farm was subject to a fine at the king’s palace.

These findings are in line with those of Gouellain (1975) states that to govern trade between European traders and Cameroonian traders in precolonial Cameroon, an officer was established to monitor trade and regulate, as far as possible, negotiations between different traders. During inspections conducted by the officer, advice was provided, arrangements were made, and all were recorded in minutes and approved by the parties involved. Subsequently, several treaties were signed between Cameroonians and Europeans, to streamline trade negotiations. Commercial conflicts prompted the British to create the Court of Equity on 14 January 1856 on the Cameroon River with the aim of fully observing a series of regulations. Several penalties have been imposed on traders who do not comply with the defined trade laws.

To codify legal trade in Cameroon, the English consul signed treaties with the Douala chiefs in 1850, 1856, 1862, 1869, and 1871. These different treaties codified customary law. A “court of equity” was created to sit once a month to settle all disputes between the English crews and the Douala. The

Court of Equity provided for parity between European representatives and Douala. In the interior of the country, each village functioned with its own market. In the Moungo region of Cameroon, Barbier et al (1983) argue that the economic relations of the villages of Moungo were strengthened by these economic exchanges. For the fluidity of exchanges, some regions had suppressed endogamy and reinforced the myth of the common ancestor to allow the expansion of trade between peoples. Markets were held periodically and the means of exchange were varied.

Challenges encounter during precolonial trade

Communication

The medium and mode of communication in the precolonial era varied from one community to another as revealed by a participant in Mankon that trade in the precolonial era was not easy for the people of Mankon as it was difficult to properly interact with other traders from distant places like Nigeria and other clans that were not having the same language of communication. This was a major challenge to precolonial trade in Cameroon and among other African countries.

“First, the medium of communication. It was not easy for a Mankon man to interact with somebody, say, across a far, distant place like what you now call Nigeria. Secondly, the language of communication was a barrier and it was difficult to carry items from far distant places to go and sell. You could only carry what your strength could measure. Thirdly, the medium of exchange was not there. We never really had a currency that people could really boast of. The road network was very poor. Moving through the forest the incident with wild animals and so most of the people left for trade and were never seen again. Animals might have attacked somebody in the bush or even the thing at the time, since the prevalence of intertribal wars; it was evident that somebody from Bangwa crossed through maybe a certain village like Bali, where maybe they might have had some conflict, inter village conflict. He would just be kidnapped, and that would be all for the person. It was very difficult. It was very difficult trading at the time” February 5 2023 1:39pm, Mankon-Bamenda.

Communication is a major instrument of trade and helps actors to negotiate the terms of the transaction and further facilitate delivery. In the precolonial period, language was a challenge to trade and the mode of transportation was a problem.

Portability of commodities and products

The transportation of commodities from one location to another was very difficult because the mode and means of transportation was mostly via trekking and this made it very difficult for the movement of commodities from one location to another. “It was difficult to carry items from far distant places to go and sell” February 5 2023 1:38pm, Mankon-Bamenda, as disclosed by a participant in Mankon.

The focus group discussion in Mankon, Bimbia, and the Northern region unveil that a medium of communication was very difficult and this affected the quality and quantity of trade amongst different clans and other countries. Some of the participants in the focus group discussion in the various communities revealed that “First, the medium of communication. It was not easy for a Mankon man to interact with somebody, say, across a far, distant place like what you now call Nigeria. The language of communication was a barrier, and secondly, it was difficult to carry items from far distant places to go and sell. Therefore; it was evident that somebody from Bangwa crossed through

maybe a certain village like Bali, where maybe they might have had some conflict, inter-village conflict. He would just be kidnapped, and that would be all for the person. It was very difficult. It was very difficult trading at the time” February 5 2023 1:40pm, Mankon-Bamenda.

Absence of a common and unique currency for trade

One currency leads to one market and smooth trade activities but in the precolonial era a common currency was a major issue and in the contemporary era it is still an issue with different countries having different currencies. The role of a unique currency in the success of trade has been proven to have a positive relationship with trade outcomes using the gravity model (Rose et al., 2000). According to the Chief of Mankon, “the medium of exchange was not there” ; again, the fun further reveals, “There was no currency for people to really boast of and used as a medium of exchange” January 24, 2023 10:15pm, Tcheboain the North. Apart from currency, other difficulty encountered was the poor road networks that led trade to move through the forest and some traders were killed by wild animals. So, most of the people left for trade and were never seen again. Animals might have attacked somebody in the bush or even at the time, but the prevalence of intertribal wars was more dominant and acted as a barrier to trade as revealed by the Chief of Mankon in the focus group discussion.

Existence of tropical diseases

The existence of tropical diseases like malaria from mosquitoes, and sleeping sicknesses from tsetse flies affected the Europeans and other countries from trading with African countries in general and Cameroon in particular as disclosed by the chiefs of Bimbia and Fossong-Wentcheng in Dschang. The participant in the focus group discussion revealed that,

“European and Central American people were not coming here again. This is a tropical area. And in the tropics, you know you have a lot of mosquitoes a lot of malaria, sleeping sicknesses from tsetse flies, and all the like. Therefore, they discovered that they could not withstand mosquito bites. So, they came across to West Africa people who were strong enough to withstand the bites of the mosquitoes and the heat of the plantations” January 24, 2023 10:05pm, Tcheboain the North.

Findings from the focus group discussion with the different chiefdoms in Cameroon showed that there was a saturation of information on how precolonial trade was carried out between Cameroon, African, and European countries. In the ancient era, the barter system and slave trade were the most dominant forms of trade. These forms of trade had key actors that were involve in a coordinated manner, and trade during these period faced many challenges.

Discussion of findings

The discussion of the research findings outlines the operating protocol of pre-colonial trade, tools, actors, formalities and obstacles of pre-colonial trade. It also outline how these lessons can be used for the proper implementation of the African Free Trade Area, which is an aid to African trade.

Protocol of operation of ancient trade

The modus operandi of precolonial trade shows the actors, products, and channels of communication in the precolonial trade. The lesson learned from precolonial trade is that there were domestic and international actors of trade. The domestic actors were traditional chiefs and traders, and foreign players. They traded products such as palm oil, raw materials like cotton, rubber, palm kernels, ebony, ivory, cocoa, peanuts, coconuts, cola, exotic fruits and animal skins. Cameroon imported salt, canned goods, tobacco, fabrics, building materials, metal and iron tools, arms and ammunition, gunpowder and lots of bad alcohol. Similarly, several localities prospered thanks to local and interregional trade that took the form of free trade and some products like salt, precious metals, leather goods, and slaves were some instruments of trade. These findings corroborate those of Prince Kum'aNdumbe III (2005) of Douala displaying that during the precolonial era, Cameroon started inserting itself into globalization by making commodities and products that were available to other economic actors and communities. Transatlantic trade, also known as the slave trade, facilitated this globalization of the Cameroonian economy. The dynamization of economies between America, Europe, and Africa has allowed Cameroon to become an essential link for the trade and sale of slaves. The mass deportations of the Cameroonians on the coasts, allowed both continents to build their economies. Beyond slaves, trade included products such as cocoa, peanuts, coconuts, cola, exotic fruits, and animal skins. Cameroon imported salt, canned goods, tobacco, fabrics, building materials, metal and iron tools, weapons and ammunition, powder, and a lot of bad alcohol.

These findings are similar to those of Radetzki, M., & Wårell, L. (2020) in the introductory chapter of the Handbook of Primary Commodities in the Global Economy published by the Cambridge Press in a historical framework for gross commodity markets in the periods of 1930-1970. These authors identify four (4) themes and among the themes, we identify primary products, bulk transportation costs, the role of public intervention and control in primary commodity production and market forces to drive economies to grow.

Moreover, the findings of Warnier (2014) and Champaud (1983) complement the fact that there was the absence of a currency of trade during the precolonial era but further extent our understanding of some of the currencies of exchange in precolonial Cameroon. Prince Kum'aNdumbe III, (2005) provides information on the different means of exchange used in the hinterland, between Cameroonians, or between Cameroonians and Europeans during the precolonial period. Thus, transactions between Cameroonians and Europeans were carried out in Kroo. The Kroo, was divided into smaller units (the equivalent of cents) intended for international trade. It was with this currency that Europeans paid the "king" a custom; which the commercial treaty of 1856 fixed at 10 Kroo per hundred tons of tonnage (Wirtz, 1973). If the Kroo is one of the main currencies used in economic exchanges during precolonial trade, it was mainly used on the Cameroonian coast. In addition, in the hinterland, commercial transactions between Douala intermediaries and producers were carried out through the "NBOM" which was worth 12 bar, or 50 kg of palm kernel (Prince Kum'aNdumbe III, 2005). Ralph (1983) in his article entitled "The Metamorphoses of Middlemen: The Duala, Europeans, and the Cameroon

Hinterland, ca. 1800 - ca. 1960”, analyzes a category of actors that he considers fundamental in Cameroon’s precolonial political and economic trajectories. The exchange of products through barter or currency was carried out within a precise regulatory framework.

From the analysis of the mode of operation of precolonial trade in Cameroon and other African countries, it will be very important for the implementation of a unique currency as revealed by Warnier (2014) in the Monetary Institution of Royalty in Central Africa” that money has a monarchical link with ancestral substances. Within the African continent to better, value its output. In addition, the development of “Made in Africa products” will give Africa an identity to go for negotiation in the “Dinner Table” with emerging and developed economies.

Tools and players of the game

The tools of precolonial trade were the products that were used for exchange like kola, salt, iron, cocoa, coffee, banana, and yams, and players of precolonial trade were the traders, families, and

kingdoms in precolonial Cameroon and in other African countries. Some of the products that came in the luggage from the Westerners were alcoholic drinks, whisky, mirrors, and gunpowder, which were exchanged for slaves that were used by the Europeans since it, was a barter system of trade. These findings according to Dike (1956) reveal that the main points of embarkation of slaves in Cameroon were the Wouri River, Bimbia, Calabar, and the Rio Del Rey to the Bakassi peninsula. In the description of the various products traded on the Cameroon coast, the authors highlight the alcohol trade. Alcohol was one of the main products brought by the Europeans and bartered for slaves. Dike (1956) points out in the same perspective that in exchange for a superior workforce, palm oil, ivory, gold wood and other products that fed the nascent European industry, Africa received the worst kind of discounted gin (brandies) and junk items. The results of this study on key trade players corroborate those of (Kufuor 2019; Ajibo et al, 2021) that unveil the importance of a two-tier technique on the success of the AfCFTA. The role of pre-colonial trade and international law in Africa and their results suggest that pre-colonial trade was marked by key actors such as African traders, kingdoms and corporations that reflected the phenomenon of pre-colonial trade in Africa to be an influence of foreign regulations from the 13th to the 18th century.

Dike’s (1956) findings further allude to the presence of “intermediaries” by referring to the roles played by key actors and players like the Duala during the precolonial period. His study is based on the contact between the indigenous peoples of Cameroon and Europeans. For him, the Duala played an intermediary role on two levels: the first referred to treachery in the process of building a national identity against external domination and the second was linked to their protest against the policy of European domination. The Duala, therefore, had to simultaneously play this role of intermediary. Politics and economics were strongly influenced by this ambivalent function performed by Duala.

The results are in line with those of Kommegne (2006) who reveal in his study entitled “The taxation of cash crops in the process of formation of the Cameroon state between 1884-1914”, states that the increase in trade on both coasts and in the interior of the country, it is therefore important to establish a currency of exchange for the various economic actors. This is how we will have the Kroo, the cowries, and the pearls as currencies of exchange to give an almost common value to the goods. Prices were fixed by mutual agreement between buyers and sellers. Relying on the Mankon people Kommegne (2006) shows that money represents a category of media considered as goods and wealth produced or acquired by the kingdom as a whole. In this society, the currency does not transcend borders. It was used to settle matrimonial compensation, entrance fees in associations, acquisitions of rituals, orchestras, musical repertoires, masks, and commercial transactions.

The types of currencies of exchange were salt, peanuts, and palm oil. Transactions were also carried out with units of account such as “basket” or “calabash”. For cowrie shells and pearls, the unit of measurement was the “string”. However, for the author, money in precolonial trade is not only an object of exchange. Above all an instrument participates in the totalization of power in the Grassfields region. Three major economic networks structure commercial life in this region. The first stretched between the Grassfields and the Atlantic coast, from Douala to the Niger Delta: ivory from the plateaus and slaves were exchanged for European trade goods (cloth, guns, gunpowder, beads, crockery, and miscellanea). The second network linked the Grassfields to the Middle Benue regions via Takum: local cloths bagged salt, ivory, and slaves were exchanged. The third network, connected to the Sokoto Empire via the Adamawa, used wholesale kola nuts, slaves, and ivory.

Procedure of precolonial trade

The authorities like the chiefs who appointed officers to take care of trade intermediation defined the rules of trade and specific days in a week were chosen to be used for trade. Pre-colonial trade in Cameroon respected a set of rules laid down by the actors. While it can be said that trade along the Cameroonian coast and within the country was not identical in terms of the types of products traded and their quality, it is also valuable to point out that there was a set of rules for trade. Gouellain (1975) states that to govern trade in precolonial Cameroon between European traders and Cameroonian traders, there was an officer responsible for monitoring traffic and regulating, as far as possible, negotiations between different traders. During these inspections conducted by the officer, advice was given, arrangements were made, and all were recorded in minutes and approved by the parties involved. Subsequently, several treaties will be signed between Cameroonians and Europeans, to streamline trade negotiations. Commercial conflicts pushed the British to create the Court of Equity on January 14, 1856, on the river “Cameroon” with the aim of fully observing a series of regulations. Several penalties will be imposed on traders who do not comply with the defined commercial laws.

These various treaties codified customary law, but they were also innovative agents in that they provided for the creation of a “court of equity” whose purpose was to sit once a month under the presidency to settle all cases of conflict between the English crews and the Douala. The Court of Equity still provided for parity between European representatives and Douala. In the interior of the country, each village functioned with its own market. In the Moungo region of Cameroon, Barbier et al (1983) argue that the economic relations of the villages of Moungo were strengthened by these economic exchanges. Commercial transactions used clan affinities and marital relationships. For the fluidity of exchanges, some regions had suppressed endogamy and reinforced the myth of the common ancestor to allow the expansion of trade between peoples. Markets were held periodically and the means of exchange were varied.

Our findings revealed that there were rules and regulations of ancient trade in precolonial Cameroon like the institution of a specific day of the week for trade and the putting in place of an officer that act as the middleman between the buyer and the seller. These rules and regulations were also applicable to some African countries as revealed by Michalopoulos and Papaioannou (2008) in their study of precolonial ethnic institutions and modern African development. Where they investigated the importance of precolonial ethnic institutions in the development of Africa using the spatial distribution of ethnicities during the precolonial era. They found a strong positive relationship between the complexity of precolonial politics and present-day development.

The lessons drawn from precolonial trade as far as the rules of the game are concerned is that market days were set up in periodical manners and officials were put in place to regulate trade amongst the different parties involved. This lesson learned is very important for the implementation of AfCFTA.

An intensification of the rules of origin that act as a guide to trade amongst African countries and specify the method in which trade will be done. Defining the rules of origin will define the quality of the products that should be imported or exported to other countries and this should be a vital part of the implementation of the AfCFTA. The AfCFTA (2022) in its manual of the rules of origin systematically spells out the procedures of the source status, as well as measures of administering these guidelines together with any institutional agenda that is essential for the application.

Obstacles faced in precolonial trade

Precolonial trade had challenges like transportation issues, medium of exchange, a true value of exchange, and communication were very weak. These problems still persist today and hinder the implementation of AfCFTA. For the proper implementation of AfCFTA, African countries need to improve the various channels of communication. These channels of communication include waterways such as the Atlantic Ocean, the Congo Basin, the Chad Basin, and the Niger Basin. Among the land routes, we can mention the tracks of the Sahel, the Sahara, the forest zone of South Cameroon, and the Gulf of Guinea. These findings are in line with those of Rönnbäck, (2018) who studied the challenges of inflation in the precolonial West in the 17th century using information and data from the Gold Coast report and found that inflation prices of slaves, and other traded commodities were at a persistence rise in precolonial West Africa.

The findings of the challenges faced in pre-colonial trade are also in line with those of Chirikure (2017). He showed that trade and exchange in pre-colonial times in Africa consisted of perishable and organic goods that could not last any longer. In addition, measuring a given commodity with another commodity was a difficulty. The implication of these findings for the implementation of AfCFTA is that intra-Africa trade needs to be promoted by producing unique products that are outstanding and not just depend on trade in primary products that have weak value additions to the growth and development of the African economy. Nevertheless, if African economies can promote “Made in Africa” commodities via structural transformation and economic diversification then, it will go a long way to alleviate poverty, hunger, and food insecurity within the continent.

Strength and limitations of the study

This study principally focused on the views of traditional rulers, experts, researchers, and academicians whose communities were involved in free trade in precolonial trade in Cameroon. This is among the first research study that will campaign trade players within the African Union in the implementation of AfCFTA. These results may be applicable to other domains like economic history, other social sciences, and public authorities on the importance of precolonial trade and how it can lead to the development of their economy and the continent at large.

A limitation to this study is a loss of information on the part of informants given some were younger and were not primary witness of the trade activities. Also, the fact that some of the best key informants have already died is a limitation as this may affect the quality of information collected. The study did not take into consideration the views of trade centers and government trade officials and which is a potential source for future study.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

The study focused on understanding ancestral knowledge of free trade and the manner in which this knowledge can be used to accelerate the implementation of the AfCFTA. Findings show sufficient evidence that precolonial trade in most Cameroon was done internally and externally, absence of a common currency that is existence of multiplicity of currencies, exchange was done with the use of primary products like maize, plantains, and palm oil. The findings further expose the rules of ancient trade, players of precolonial trade, and challenges of precolonial trade. These results help our understanding of the different factors that can constrain trade like the absence of a single currency for trade and further draw our attention to the ancestral rules of trade, which was done periodically, and with intermediaries to facilitate trade.

From the lesson learned, the study recommends the creation of an African currency that will facilitate the implementation of the AfCFTA. In addition, the study further suggests the intensification and brainstorming of members states of the AfCFTA on the rules of origin of trade that will accelerate the implementation of AfCFTA. This study recommend that Cameroon should produce goods and services that are unique and identical to better participate in the implementation of the AfCFTA. Finally, an infrastructural development enhancing strategy could be developed in Cameroon, which will go a long way to enhance and increase the movement of persons, goods and services.

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Appendices

Appendices 1: Discussion Guide for Free Trade in Precolonial Cameroon: Historical Perspectives from Traditional Leaders and Elders

Interview guide

Your Majesty,

As part of a research project on Free Trade in Precolonial Cameroon, we are seeking an interview on the practice of trade between the kingdoms of what became Cameroon and the kingdoms of other countries. The following interview guide will form the basis of our discussion and is sent to you to help you prepare for the discussion.

1. Presentation of the Kingdom

- - When was your kingdom established?
- - From which generation (date of birth) are you in the Fossong-Wentcheng dynasty?
- - Who was the King of the Fossong-Wentcheng before the arrival of the Europeans (Germans) in Cameroon?

2. The actors of commercial exchanges

- - Did your kingdom have trade relations with other kingdoms outside of Cameroon?
- - Who were the main actors involved?
- - Which kingdoms were partners in these exchanges?
- - Who were the major traders of the time? Do you know of any families in your kingdom that made a fortune from this trade?

3. The marketplace

- - Was it trade with money or simply barter?
- - If so, what currency was used for trade?
- - Can you describe how the trade with "foreigners" was carried out within the framework of barter?
- - In which market was the trade carried out?
- - How can you describe the atmosphere in the markets?
- - What products were traded?

4. Routes and obstacles to free trade

- - What were the routes (roads, by sea?) used by the traders?
- - What were the means of transportation to get to the markets?
- - What were the main difficulties encountered in precolonial trade?
- - Were there taxes or barriers to pay to cross the borders of kingdoms?
- - Was the language of expression a problem? If so, how was it overcome? Were there interpreters?
- - Was there any litigation between traders? if so, how were they resolved?