

# Trade as Catalyst for Interactions among the Ndop Plain Chiefdoms of the North West Region of Cameroon, 1975-2019.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the role played by trade in enhancing relations between the chiefdoms of Ndop plain between 1975 and 2019. Though the history of this region is marked by conflicts and surge for dominance and prominence, their involvement of inter-community trade became a leverage or catalyst for interactions between chiefdoms and foundations of peaceful coexistence. For the realization of this paper, data was drawn from oral, primary and secondary sources and the qualitative method of analyses used in analyzing data. Findings revealed that, trade items such as maize, beans, groundnuts, fish, arts and crafts, motivated interactions among the chiefdoms. Other major trade items which cemented relations were pottery and palm-wine. The paper concludes that these items became a blessing and the frosty relations which hitherto existed were minimized. Such a study comes in to change the narratives as previous studies on the area gives a bleak image as they depict inter-chiefdom skirmishes and tensions as the feature of the area. With this, it hoped that this study will go a long way to enforce the argument that, trade can be seen to be a factor of coexistence and not division and authorities and decision makers can count on the strength of these arguments to foster peace and unity not only in the area but beyond.

**Key:** Trade, Interactions, Ndop Plain, Northwest Region and Cameroon

## INTRODUCTION

Trade and interactions among communities in the Ndop Plain have been inevitable activities where inhabitants engaged with one another, primarily due to trading which served as a typical example of community interaction.<sup>1</sup> Trade has remained a powerful enabler of the transformative changes required to achieve sustainable development. The strengthened, implementation, and role of trade to accomplish goals and targets, has been both explicitly and tacitly recognized. This has led to increased investments and institutional capacity-building, that resulted in that improvements of employment, transparency, education, governance, and socio-economic interactions. Through trade, inhabitants moved from one community to another in the Ndop plain in search of goods. This movement fostered interactions among communities, as constant meetings, occurred among these chiefdoms of the Ndop plain in particular and other African countries in general. Thus, interactions had always been a characteristic of most communities in the Ndop Plain. Trade, provided significant impetus for these exchanges, and notably, markets served as focal points for interactions.

Interactions were essential because, some villages could not consume certain goods or agricultural produce due to geographical limitations. This scarcity, encouraged relationships among communities, with economic items such as maize, bean, cola nuts, tobacco, arts and crafts that brought them together<sup>2</sup>. Goods like palm oil, groundnuts, and special pottery items like ceramic arts, pates, bowls, cups, pots, Jars, and storage container, added considerable value to these interactions. The Ndop Plain, boasted vibrant markets, that included Bambalang, Bagonlan, Bamali, and Balikumbat, which were supported by agriculture, a dominant sector in the local economy. The shared characteristics of the Ndop Plain, facilitated daily interactions among the thirteen

<sup>1</sup>Note by the UNCTAD Secretariat United Nations Conference on Trade and Development From decisions to actions: "Trade as a catalyst for accomplishing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," Ninth session Geneva, 27 November–1 December 2017 Item 4 of the provisional agenda.

<sup>2</sup>"UNCTAD"

villages, which contributed to the socio-economic development and survival of the communities. Interactions among these communities, has improved the standard of living of the inhabitants. Collective actions, through multidimensional trade collaborations, were essential to address cross-border social and economic development, that highlighted the interactions of these communities for survival.

The Ndop Plain consists of thirteen villages: Bamunka, Babungo, Baba I, Babessi, and Bagonlan to the east; Bali Gashu and Bali Gansin to the west; and Bamessing and Bamali at the gateway from Bamenda. To the south, the villages include Balikumbat, Bamikumbit, Bafanji, and Bambalang.<sup>3</sup> These villages were coterminous with the Ngoketunjia Division of the Northwest region of Cameroon. Ndop shared common boundaries with Kom in the Boyo Division to the northwest, Tubah subdivision to the west, and the River Nun and Bamboutous Division to the south. This area of study covers a total of 1,151 square kilometers and lies at an altitude of 1,100 meters above sea level.<sup>4</sup> Community conflicts, discouraged trade interactions and posed a significant obstacle to community engagement. Therefore, this paper argues that trade was a crucial factor that contributed to economic interactions among communities in the Ndop Plain, in spite long existed conflicts.<sup>5</sup>

### Conceptual Clarification

The Cambridge dictionary, defined trade as a process of buying and selling, or exchange of goods and services between people or countries, particularly when both economic and social conditions improved.<sup>6</sup> According to Adam Smith, and based on a review of the literature, trade was defined as the exchange of goods and services, driven by the natural human propensity to trade, barter, and the exchange of one thing for another.<sup>7</sup> Fueled by individuals to pursue their own interests, this process, benefited everyone involved. The inhabitants of these communities in the Ndop Plain, exchanged goods and services, that promoted interactions among chiefdoms. Trade among these communities, was primarily local. Secret bags, were bags, that were used by fons in the Ndop plain chiefdoms where most of the community traditional medicine were kept. These bags were items of trade.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In scientific writing, it was important to take stock of what had been written and the conclusions that had been reached at. Ngwa, argued that development authorities served as agents of socio-economic change in the Ndop region of Cameroon.<sup>8</sup> His findings revealed that, development authorities improved the living standards of the communities. These improvements, caused other communities around the Ndop Plain who migrated to different areas and benefited from the development, which ultimately increased the level of community interactions. In another article, Ngwa, sustained the argument that the craft industry and trade in Ndop, were the mainstay of the local economy. His findings, proved that the villages in the Ndop Plain, championed economic activities in the area. He also provided instances where exchanges of secret bags among chiefdoms helped tightened relationships. Regarding the exchanges of secret bags from the palaces, there was a high possibility of conflict reduction among these communities. Nkwi concluded that, many efforts were made by village authorities that enhanced interactions among these communities.<sup>9</sup>

### The Origin and Settlement of the People in Ndop Plain

The Bamunka were believed to have been the first settlers in the Ndop Plain. They traced their origin to a rebel prince named Chenfong, who moved from Adamawa to the Ndop Plain with his people. Under the leadership

<sup>3</sup>Canute A. Ngwa, "Craft, Industry and Trade in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Pan-Tikar Journal of History*, The University of Bamenda, Vol.1, No.1, (2013):1.

<sup>4</sup>"Ngwa, 1".

<sup>5</sup>"Ngwa, 1".

<sup>6</sup><https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/economic-development>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.researchgate.net>.

<sup>8</sup>Canute A. Ngwa, "Development Authorities as Agents of Socio-Economic Change: An Historical Assessment of The Upper Nun Valley Development Authority (UNDVA) In the Ndop Region of Cameroon, University of Buea, 1970 -1945," *Nordic Journal of Africa Studies*, (2003).

<sup>9</sup>Paul Nkwi, *Traditional Diplomacy: A study Inter-Chiefdom Relation in The Western Grassfields, North West Province of Cameroon*. (Yaounde: The Department of Sociology, 1986.).

of Chinfoubikew, who was accompanied by his half-brother Tounemongwe, they established their community. Tounemongwe later detached to form the chiefdom of Bambalang.<sup>10</sup> Myths and oral traditions held that the various Tikar groups who settled in the Ndop Plain traced their origins to Tibati, Kimi, and Ndobo in the Adamawa region of the far north. During their migration and settlement, these Tikars moved together in groups, establishing ten villages in their current locations. The Tikar villages included Bamunka, Bambalang, Bangolan, Baba I, Babessi, Bamessing, Bafanjia, Bamukumbit, Babungo, and Bamali.<sup>11</sup> Their migration and settlement were sandwiched between the Chamba, who later formed the chiefdoms of Bali-Kombat, Baligansing, and Baliganshu.<sup>12</sup> The thirteen villages in the Ndop Plain established their origins, migrations, and settlements at different times and geographical locations.<sup>13</sup> These two distinct groups, were the chamba and tikars, who migrated in waves. This ethnic unit, never branded themselves nor were they strong enough to resist external incursions into the Plain.<sup>14</sup> Their relations were characterized by hostilities over land, murder, and slave raids.

### (i) The Economy of the people in Ndop Plain

Trade in the chiefdoms of the Ndop plain, was the mainstay that encouraged interactions among the chiefdoms. Consequently, vendors like agricultural operators, irons operators, who were unfamiliar with some villages in these chiefdoms, were compelled to establish trade relations with their neighbors in order to benefit. Babungo, located in the Ndop plain, excelled in iron industry and this industry, produced items like knives, spears, iron jars, cutlasses and hoes. These producers, where people from Babungo who were experts in iron smelting.<sup>15</sup> The production of these items, empowered the agricultural sectors in the chiefdoms. These items that were produced, served the economic needs of the people in the Ndop plain. The currency used for the exchange of these goods, was France CFA and it was a common currency that was used among these chiefdoms.

The Babungo community, with their industrial expertise, encouraged other chiefdoms like Bamali, Bambalang, Babessi and Baba I, who traded with kola nut and Tobacco from Bamali, to exchanged iron products. The products made from iron ore were hoes, spears, machetes and knives, that were highly needed in the chiefdoms, and these products, necessitated economic interactions with other areas.<sup>16</sup> These villages, established trade links with Babungo and this promoted economic interactions among the inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> The major trade routes that were used, were Bamessing through Bamali, Babessi through Baba I and Balikumbat through Bamali. These were routes within the chiefdoms that were frequently used by the traders. The irons industries in Babungo, produced swords that were used by palace guards in many chiefdoms.<sup>18</sup>



Picture 1: Iron Product Produced by Smelters

<sup>10</sup>TemtsangMbongning Brandon, "Traditional Institutions and Land Conflict Management in Bamunka from 1879-2017", (Masters Dissertation in History, University of Bamenda, 2020), 18.

<sup>11</sup>"Brabdon, 23".

<sup>12</sup>Ghogomu Ezekiel Nkonki, outline History of Mbaw-Yakum, (Mbngwi, 2009), p.5.

<sup>13</sup>Selfor Gastain Mbifornyi, "The Dynamic of Animals Rituals in Bamunka fondom, from pre-colonial period to 2006", (DIPES II In History, Higher Teacher Training College, University of Bamenda 2020), 23.

<sup>14</sup>"Nbifornyi, 7".

<sup>15</sup>Canute A. Ngwa, "Craft Industry and Trade In The Ndop Region Of Cameroon in The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", *Pan-Tikar Journal of History* Volume 1, No.2, (March 2013): 2.

<sup>16</sup>"Ngwa, 2".

<sup>17</sup>"Ngwa, 2".

<sup>18</sup>Fowler, "Babungo: a study of iron production, trade, and power in a nineteenth-century Ndop plain (Cameroon)", (PhD Thesis in History, University of London, 1990), 4.

Source: Picture taken from a business man in Bambalang, April 15,2022.

All these items mentioned above, were in high demand across the chiefdoms. To satisfy consumers, traders within the communities, established trade links that facilitated economic relations.<sup>19</sup> Traders from almost all the chiefdoms, engaged in trade with the Babungo people. Traders connected with their neighbors to exchange diverse items. Trade within these chiefdoms, was primarily local and exchanges were solely within the Ndop plain. Trade was encouraged and motivated by the geographical distance between communities.<sup>20</sup>

## (ii) Trade in works of Arts and pottery products

The Babungo people also produced carved items such as mortars, pestles, stools, royal thrones, bedsteads, dishes, and spoons.<sup>21</sup> These items were common household goods. They also crafted masks for masquerades and other decorative objects. These carved items, attracted traders from across the chiefdoms and created economic links with Babungo.<sup>22</sup> One of the most significant factors that motivated interactions among the inhabitants of the chiefdoms, was when the authorities of Babungo, converted part of their palace into a museum. Established in 2003 and opened to visitors in 2006, this museum, transformed part of the palace into a touristic site.<sup>23</sup> The museum, fostered strong relations between tourists and traders within the chiefdoms who came for business and leisure from various villages. It was important to note that, the museum in the Babungo palace, was a key factor that promoted the connections among the people of the Ndop plain. Masks were among the items used by palaces for their Masquerades. See picture 2



Picture 2: Mask by Masquerades in the Chiefdoms

Source: Picture taken from Toku Isaac Private Museum in Bamessing, March 10,2022.

The museum served as an income-generating facility where visitors paid to enter. Researchers also visited the museum for their studies that made it a hub for interactions. Almost all the palaces in the chiefdoms, maintained close relationships due to the potential of Babungo. The museum showcased carved items from local artisans.<sup>24</sup> Villages or palaces in need of decorative carved items, connected with the Babungo people for supplies. Through trade, the museum facilitated interactions among the inhabitants.

Each village had its own strengths that motivated trade interactions. While Babungo were experts in iron smelting and wood carving, other villages in the Ndop plain, also had unique potentials that fostered trade. For instance, the Bamessing people were renowned for their pottery, due to abundant clay soil, that permitted

<sup>19</sup>“Fowler, 4”.

<sup>20</sup>“fowler,5”.

<sup>21</sup>Canute A.Ngwa, “Craft Industry and Trade In The Ndop Region Of Cameroon in The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”, *Pan-Tikar Journal of History* Volume 1, No.2,(March 2013): p, 5

<sup>22</sup>“Ngwa,5”.

<sup>23</sup>“Ngwa,5”.

<sup>24</sup>Paul NKwi, *Traditional Diplomacy: A study of inter-chiefdom relations in the western grass fields, North West province of Cameroon.* (Yaoundé, department of sociology,1986),p,25.



them to produce a variety of clay items.<sup>25</sup> In 1983, the Presbyterian Church established a press pot center in Bamessing, which became a hub for clay-based production.<sup>26</sup> The products made from clay, were highly needed throughout the chiefdoms and it served as important trade items. Traders within the chiefdoms, were eager to establish trade links with the Bamessing people, who were skilled to produce clay goods. These items produced like Jars, dishes and pots, significantly contributed to economic interactions among the chiefdoms.<sup>27</sup> The primary centers for pottery was Bamessing.<sup>28</sup>

The pottery industry yielded an impressive range of items that included pots of various sizes and shapes, as well as pipes. These pots were used to fetch water, stored cereals, and to cook food. In particular, they were used by traditional doctors to prepare herbal remedies in the chiefdoms.<sup>29</sup> They also produced other objects such as cups, statues, plates, and decorative objects that were used for local trade within the chiefdoms. These items produced by the Bamessing inhabitants, were used as trade items. Those villages who did not have the privilege to produce such items, engaged in trade connections in order to consume what they could not produce. The pottery industry in Bamessing, was not staffed solely with workers from Bamessing; it also included artisans from Bamali, Babessi, Bamunka, and Bambalang. Almost all inhabitants from these villages had the opportunity to work at the press pot center in Bamessing.<sup>30</sup> This industry, became a point of convergence where individuals from different villages gathered for work. This represented a peak of interactions among the chiefdoms. The industry was economically significant, that produced goods from clay materials for trade. Traders from other chiefdoms, especially on market days, traveled and traded with the Bamessing people in order to exchange other items. Markets served as venues that highly encouraged interactions among the chiefdoms of the Ndop plain.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the pottery industry established in 1983 in Bamessing by the Presbyterian church, inhabitants also operated private factories where similar items were produced. The local artisans, possessed the skills necessary to craft items from clay. Women were also actively involved in the production of these clay goods in Bamessing. The output from this industry, greatly encouraged traders who engaged in commerce with these products. The pottery industry, facilitated extensive interactions with all traders within the chiefdoms of the Ndop plain. This was a clear indication that trade was a catalyst to chiefdoms interactions. (see picture 4).



Picture 4: Clay Items

Source: Press Spot Bamessing, March 10, 2022.

<sup>25</sup>“Nkwi,27”.

<sup>26</sup>Toku Francis aged 48, an inhabitant of Bamessing and a pottery farmer, interviewed by Tamah Loson, Bambalang, February 4, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Canute A.Ngwa, “Craft Industry and Trade In The Ndop Region Of Cameroon in The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”, *Pan-Tikar Journal of History* volume 1, No.2,(March 2013):p,4.

<sup>28</sup>“Ngwa,4”.

<sup>29</sup>Fongoung Julius, aged, 39, an indigene of Bambalang and a trader, interviewed by Tamah Loson, Bambalang, February 15, 2024.

<sup>30</sup>Temubieh Eric, aged, 48, an indigene of Bamali and worker at the press spot, interviewed by Tamah Loson, Bambalang, February 19, 2024.

<sup>31</sup>Paul NKwi, *Traditional Diplomacy: A study of inter-chiefdom relations in the western grass fields, North West province of Cameroon.* (Yaoundé, department of sociology,1986),p,27.

Economic relations among these chiefdoms, tightened trade contacts with their neighbors. This was due to the production of clay items. Palaces within the chiefdoms, loved decorative items to decorate their palaces traditionally. These decorative items from clay materials, were mostly from Bamessing.<sup>32</sup> It was therefore important for these palaces to send palace traders. Palace traders were special persons who were trained from the palace to carry on the activities of the palace. These traders, traded directly with the producers who produced decorative items meant for the palace. These contacts, motivated the interactions among the chiefdoms. Pottery contributed a lot to the economic interactions among the chiefdoms of the Ndop plain. This was because, they produced a lot of trade items from clay materials, that were at their disposal. Because of this, they used this opportunity and empowered themselves and created ways that improved their economy. Pottery items, motivated many business people within the chiefdoms who became big business tycoons in the domain of trade. The economic interactions among these chiefdoms were therefore encouraged by the traders and the items they used in trade.

### **(iii) Agriculture and Fishing Activities**

In another dimension, agricultural produce from Bambalang like beans, maize, and groundnuts, caught the attention of many traders. Who left other villages and traded with the Bambalang people. Groundnuts were of two types; fresh and dry groundnuts and this produce, were in excess in Bambalang, compared to other villages. These were items of trade that promoted interactions among the chiefdoms. This was the reason why Bambalang, were champion in groundnuts production in the Ndop plain. Agricultural activity in Bambalang, employed about 80% of the entire population.<sup>33</sup> Everybody was engaged in the production of these produce for business purpose.

The production of this produce for sale, motivated traders within the chiefdoms, who looked for trade relations with the inhabitants of Bambalang in order to have trade items. Farmers were the sole suppliers of agricultural produce that were used as trade items. And so, business people within the chiefdoms, created strong interactions with the farmers in order to have a steady supply. These traders from different villages, even had the opportunity and penetrated into the interior of Bambalang in search of trade items.<sup>34</sup> So it was important to understand that the economic interactions among these traders, opened trade routes like Bambalang, Baba 1, Bamessing and Balikumbat through Bafanji, where they had the opportunity and bypassed the middleman. The traders had strong interactions with the farmers in such a way that, these traders knew all routes in Bambalang. And when trade items like beans, groundnuts, and maize were ready, the traders knew where to collect them.<sup>35</sup>

Bambalang also had great influence in fishing in the entire chiefdom of the Ndop plain. This hub, call for trade relations with other chiefdoms. The Bamendjin dam brought a lot of fishing opportunities to the entire Bambalang community after the construction in 1974 in kwotamo, the Noun Division, in the Western Region of Cameroon. This fishing opportunity, caused the greater population of the Bambalang people who became fishermen and women. These fish, became trade items that were so demanding in the entire Ndop plain chiefdoms. Where traders were so much interested and created trade relations with the inhabitants of Bambalang, that permitted them to consume the fish. Villages that were not opportune to have the privilege of fishing, created economic links with the Bambalang people for business purposes.<sup>36</sup> The creation of trade links, motivated the economic interactions among the chiefdoms of the Ndop plain. Trade was therefore a driven force to communities' interactions.

### **(iv) Palm wine production**

Tapping as one of the economic activities in Bambalang, contributed greatly to the interactions among the chiefdoms. Raffia wine from raffia trees, were used as trade items in Bambalang, and the community was blessed with natural raffia trees. This raffia wine that were used as trade items, were consumed within the chiefdoms of the Ndop plain. Villages that were not blessed with natural raffia trees, created good relations

<sup>32</sup>Nkieh Johnson, aged 47, an inhabitant of Bambalang and trader, interviewed by Tamah Loson, Bambalang, February 21, 2024.

<sup>33</sup>Ndiwanbah Marcel, aged 50, an inhabitant of Bambalang and a farmer, interviewed by Tamah loson, Bambalang, May 25, 2024.

<sup>34</sup>Tokoh Marvis, aged 35, an inhabitant of Bambalang and farmer, interviewed by Tamah Loson, Bambili, February 8, 2024.

<sup>35</sup>Tapah Odette, aged 49, an inhabitant of Bambalang and a farmer, Interviewed by Tamah Loson, Bambalang, February 9, 2024.

<sup>36</sup>VendentehUsmanu, aged 50, an inhabitant of Bangolan and a trader, Interviewed by Tamah Loson, Bambalang, February 9, 2024.

with the Bambalang people, who were abundantly blessed with these raffia trees.<sup>37</sup>The consumption of raffia wine, was very high among these chiefdoms. Traders left Balikumbit, Bafanji, Babungo, Babessi, and crossed to Bambalang in search of raffia wine. This trade items led to interactions among communities. Bamali had raffia trees but not as many as Bambalang. Bamali transplanted raffia trees, obtained from Bambalang.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this study, was to examine the contributions of trade to chiefdoms interactions among the Ndop plain. The paper further examined trade items that were used to foster interactions. Trade was a potential economic activity in the chiefdoms that played a very significant role that led to the development among the chiefdoms. Findings revealed that villages who did not have the privilege to produce certain products due to their limited potential and skills, enjoyed economic interactions. Findings further revealed that, iron industry that produced trade items, motivated interactions among communities. Findings also revealed that, works of arts and pottery through their trade items, promoted interactions. It also revealed that agriculture and fishing in the chiefdoms, especially the village of Bambalang, played a significant role to chiefdoms interactions. Furthermore, palm and raffia wine, tightened trade interactions among the chiefdoms. Trade in general went a long way to tighten the interactions among these chiefdoms. The chiefdoms in the Ndop plain, enjoyed their interactions through trade. The improvement in conflicts management, improved the level of interactions among communities in the Ndop plain.

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