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0521562287 - Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers: The Duala and their Hinterland,
c. 1600-c. 1960

Ralph A. Austen and Jonathan Derrick

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

This book tells the story of a community which, even by African standards, has always been rather small. The people calling themselves Duala never numbered more than 20,000. Even if one adds another 30,000 members of neighboring ethnic groups with cultural and economic ties to the Duala, the total accounts for only 1 to 3 percent of the population and territory of Cameroon, itself not one of the largest states in Africa. Why then should two non-African historians devote so much effort to studying the history of the Duala? More to the point, why should an international audience bother to read the results of our efforts?

The most immediate significance of this history derives from the enduring position of the Duala as “middlemen” between the European-dominated Atlantic world and the hinterland of Cameroon. This role has been played out through a series of situations which, presented separately, would constitute rather conventional – some even old-fashioned – genres of Africanist historiography: “trade and politics on the X rivers”; “the X-people under German and French colonial rule”; and finally “the invention of tradition/construction of identity as a discourse of coloniality/postcoloniality.” In the Duala case it is the possibility of combining these genres which allows us to create a whole which may, perhaps, transcend the sum of its parts.

The concept tying together all these episodes of Duala history is that of middlemen. What this term means in an empirical sense is quite evident. Throughout the approximately three centuries discussed here the Duala occupied a privileged position of intermediacy in European–African relations: first as merchant-brokers of precolonial trade; then as a colonial-era elite of educated *évolués* and planters; and finally as claimants to anti-colonial political leadership.

The division of chapters which follows is based upon the chronology of this evolving middleman role. From the time of their establishment in the Wouri estuary at the site of the present-day city of Douala (*c.* 1600) up until the full organization of a German colonial economy in the 1890s, the Duala provided Europeans with a variety of commodities brought from

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the interior: beginning with ivory, shifting to slaves in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and for the latter three quarters of the nineteenth century shifting again to palm oil and palm kernels. The changes in the composition of exports produced alterations in the internal organization and scale of Duala middleman activities but the most basic function – control of riverain canoe trade and the products of inland labor – remained constant.¹

During the colonial period the middleman role of the Duala moved from the arena of commerce to that of politics and culture. They lost their monopoly of trade on the rivers early in the era of German rule but took up new positions within the colonial establishment as “native chiefs,” interpreters and clerks. They also served as clergy and teachers in the missionary school system, establishing Duala as a lingua franca of the Littoral (northern coastal) region of Cameroon. Their major economic role up until the Great Depression of the 1930s does not fit the normal definition of a middleman function: they produced food and export crops on inland plantations. However, this form of enterprise derived directly from the old commercial system, since the plantations were established along the rivers where the Duala had previously traded (and planted some food crops); the labor force also came from the same interior populations (and initially the same individuals) who had previously been purchased as slaves; and finally, this whole sector of the Duala economy also proved transitory, thus serving less to redefine the position of the Duala than as a model for other Cameroonian groups who eventually came to dominate export agriculture.

The Duala also played a pioneering but ultimately not very effective role in the development of Cameroonian nationalist politics. From quite early in the German period through the post-World War I French mandate and trusteeship administration they protested against various European policies and demanded greater autonomy for Africans within the colonial order. However, in all these endeavors the relationship between ethnic particularist and national goals and between scale of the claims and the possibility of their realization remained problematic.

Finally, during the 1930s but especially from the 1940s the Duala devoted much of their energy to redefining their own past and ethnic identity in order to shore up a declining economic, political and even demographic position. The account of the past embodied in the new/revived Ngondo organization and festival cannot be reconciled, in many particulars and on some very major points, with the record of Duala history developed through our own research. Nonetheless, such consciousness is itself part of Duala history just as it has become an element in the general study of African development. The Ngondo's focus on the *jengu*

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water-spirit cult represents an instructive reinterpretation of the critical role played by riverain navigation, migration, and related social hierarchies in earlier Duala middleman experience.

In comparison to other – commercially far more significant – middleman groups of precolonial Western Africa, the Duala are remarkable for their persistence into the twentieth century as a major factor in Cameroonian history. The absence of such continuity elsewhere in Africa may explain why so little attention has been paid to middlemen as a general historical phenomenon. What circumstances allowed the Duala to continue so long in their intermediary role will be explained at various points in the subsequent chapters. Ultimately, however, they failed to retain anything comparable to the dominance over external ties that they had enjoyed in the period up to the late 1800s. Yet, despite the decline of the Duala themselves, their historical role provides something of a paradigm for subsequent African elites. Moreover, their own perception of this long experience of mediation provides us with special insights into the meaning of modern history for African participants.

Had African political economy progressed clearly beyond the stage of middlemen towards substantially integrated modernization, then the history of the Duala would represent only a link with the past rather than a mirror of the present. However, postcolonial Africa remains heavily dependent upon resources controlled by industrialized countries in Europe, America and Asia. At the same time within the continent, local communities, whether still rural or shifted to urban and peri-urban settings, retain a certain degree of economic and cultural autonomy from the centers controlling modern resources. At such centers are elites whose status is notoriously difficult to define in orthodox Western or inherited African terms.

One concept frequently used to define the position of these new elites is that of “broker,” a term which links the literal function of historical middlemen with a more metaphorical sense of what it means in contemporary Africa to be at once a client to external sources of power and wealth and a patron within a network of indigenous dependents. In their specific history the Duala do not, however, provide a case study for this entire range of middleman roles since they never achieved (except in the tenuous early colonial form to be discussed in chapter 4) control of an African state.² It is, of course, possible to link this history to the present in a more theoretical fashion, but for reasons of both personal inclination and considered judgment, we have not done so.

The continuing prominence of middleman functions in modern Africa speaks to larger development issues but does not suggest any ways to approach them. Whether observed from outside or experienced from within, the middleman role is essentially ambiguous. It does not define the

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vast and very uncontrollable poles of Africa and Europe but is rather defined by their separate and frequently incompatible dynamics.

Such situations of ambiguity lend themselves more readily to cultural than to economic theorization. The concept of “liminality” and its derivative notions of the trickster and carnivalesque directly address the “betwixt and between” position of both the Duala and the postcolonial elites whom they prefigure.³ As will be seen especially in the last chapter, the Duala have often been perceived by both Europeans and fellow Africans as “tricksters” and a much-cited essay by a Cameroonian scholar has characterized the entire political culture of contemporary Africa as a perverse carnivalesque.⁴ A more positive reading of such a position can be derived from Homi Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity,” which challenges the very notion of “authentic” African and European identities against which intermediaries such as the Duala are posited.⁵

We make no explicit use of any of these cultural concepts here, although one of us has done so in literary studies dealing with Cameroon and other regions of Africa.⁶ For present purposes we considered it important to demonstrate that the Duala past had more potential for substantial achievement than such theories imply. Not all Duala efforts were unsuccessful and even those that ended in failure, tragedy or disillusion contain elements of heroic struggle, adversity and imagination which deserve to be taken seriously on their own terms before being deconstructed through postmodernist scrutiny.

Our ultimate justification for this study, therefore, is that any understanding of how either the political economy or the cultural situation of the modern African elite evolved requires a full examination of its historical forerunners. Among the most significant yet least systematically studied of these forerunners are middleman groups such as the Duala.

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2 From fishermen to middlemen: the Duala inland and on the coast in the formative period, c. 1500–c. 1830

Nowhere do the multiple possibilities for constructing any history come into such obvious confrontation as in accounts of beginnings. In the case of the Duala, even more than for other African peoples, statements about the earliest stages of development appear most fully articulated in the form of oral traditions. Yet the references in Duala accounts to such distant centers as Egypt, Ethiopia, Moses at the Red Sea or even the more proximate Congo and Northern Cameroon savanna are difficult to accept in empirical terms. They seem rather to be attempts at establishing an identity in terms derived from a world encountered long after the events they claim to describe.¹

Against the claims of these traditions, however, the evidence coming directly from the period prior to the 1800s is very thin: no indigenous texts, virtually no archeological materials, scattered and fragmentary European observations, and a few clues from comparative linguistics. Oral tradition, with all its ideological overtones, will thus have to be used as a major source for this chapter. Where it is most plausible and can be checked to some degree against other evidence, it may help reconstruct events. And where the ideology in such traditions derives from longstanding local experience, even as this includes contact with the outside world, it can be used even more fruitfully to comprehend the relationship between events and Duala historical consciousness.

The ethnographic present: c. 1850

The period upon which the earliest oral traditions along with all the European sources concentrate is one when the Duala had already taken up their role as commercial middlemen in the Atlantic trade. In order to understand something about the genesis of this role out of conditions that may initially have had an entirely different logic, it is necessary first to move in the opposite direction: to present an ahistorical “still photo” of

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the Duala situation in the better-known mid nineteenth century. In reality this period was no more stable than any other in Duala history and the next chapter will examine at some length the changes taking place between the end of the slave trade and the beginning of colonial rule. The present brief lapse into synchrony is intended to serve historical inquiry in several indirect ways. It will introduce the geographical and cultural landscape in which Duala history took place; it will indicate the kinds of questions one wants to ask about an earlier period; and it will inoculate us to some degree against asking these questions in the form dictated by the very situation whose beginnings they are supposed to explain. Once having established a context for (we hope responsible) speculation about the dimmer past, we can go on to look at what were unquestionably the two major events of this earlier period: the movement of the Duala from the interior to the coast, and the development of regular trading contacts with Europeans.

At the moment when they were first documented in any detail by the outside world, the Duala occupied the focal point of a trading network that extended from the Wouri estuary up the various river systems of the Cameroon Littoral: the Wouri itself with its Abo, Dibombe and other minor tributaries; the Dibamba,² the Kwakwa; and the Mungo (see map). The Duala themselves were concentrated within the location of the present city of Douala. Along the rivers lived other peoples, some linguistically and culturally related to the Duala (the Bodiman, Malimba, Oli/Ewodi/Wuri, Mungo, and Pongo) and some less closely related although partially assimilated (the Basaa, Bakoko and Abo).

The Duala engaged in fishing and in agriculture (the latter mostly carried on by slaves and women). However, their most lucrative activity was bartering goods obtained through canoe expeditions inland (in the nineteenth century mainly palm oil and kernels plus ivory) for imported commodities brought to Douala by European oceanic shippers.

Douala was politically independent of its European trading partners and likewise did not extend any formal sovereignty inland, except for a few agricultural settlements within ten miles of the port, occupied by Duala-owned slaves. Internally, Douala was divided into a number of residential centers (“towns”) located on the high ground along the Wouri river banks and dominated by two major lineages, Bell (Bonanjo) and Akwa (Bonambela). The heads of the Bell and Akwa lineages were called “Kings” by Europeans and the rulers of several lesser locations (Deido/Bonebele: Joss/Bonapriso: Hickory/Bonaberi) were recognized as “chiefs” (see table 2.1). Contemporary European observers saw no evidence of any formal political structure uniting the Duala, although ritual societies exercised some influence across lineages and settlements.

Trading relations with both Europeans and inland peoples were

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position they were to occupy upon the nineteenth-century Cameroon coast.

The chronology of settlement: non-written sources

In attempting to describe such an apparently straightforward process as the movement of the Duala to their present geographical location, we are confronted with all the problems of limited and questionable evidence. What is popularly assumed to be the “primordial” base of African social change, the ethnic-linguistic identities of the peoples concerned is itself, for the Cameroon Littoral, as elsewhere in the world, a product of historical change.

The populations in this region are all Bantu-speaking which implies that they may have ultimately migrated from some common point of demographic dispersion. Linguistic evidence suggests that the latter is not far from the Cameroon coast in space, although the time gap of close to two millennia and the available archeological record of iron and ceramic artefacts do not permit an easy link between Bantu origins and historical accounts of contemporary Central African populations.³

Among the accepted categories of local groups, the Basaa and Bakoko are more numerous and have been in the Wouri estuary for a longer time than the entire set of Sawa (coastal) Bantu-speakers (the Duala and those most closely related to them). Although their own oral traditions refer back over what may be great periods of time to migrations from unspecified distant regions, the Basaa and Bakoko are mainly cultivators who are seen, in the relatively recent past, as more stable than the aquatic Sawa Bantu. Moreover, it was assumed for some time that the Duala language had particular affinities to Bakota and Lingala in Gabon and the Congo and that the Sawa Bantu had therefore migrated to Cameroon from the more southern regions of Central Africa.⁴

Lexostatistical analysis by contemporary linguists suggests that Sawa Bantu is, in fact, much more closely related to Basaa and Bakoko than to any Gabon-Congo languages.⁵ Moreover, the most reliable Duala oral traditions say nothing specific about any movement from a point beyond a relatively recent homeland, Piti, which is located only a short distance from Douala on a creek linked to the Dibamba River (see table 2.2). We are thus left with little basis for postulating any origin for the Duala outside of Cameroon which is, after all, the presumed starting point of the general Bantu-speaking dispersion into the Congo-Ogowe Basin and points south and east.⁶

The Duala oral traditions that were recorded earliest and appear least influenced by external motifs are summarized in table 2.2 (for references to

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the genealogical position of named individuals, see table 2.1). With the partial exception of the two most recent versions, all give the point of origin for the Duala as Piti or its environs. The narratives all begin with events leading from Piti to the present site of Douala, with the longest genealogies going back seven to ten generations from Bele/King Bell (8B) who begins the list of figures we can trace through written sources.

These accounts also reinforce, to varying degrees, the belief that the Duala and all the Sawa Bantu speaking peoples of the Cameroon Littoral are descended from a single ancestor, Mbedi (0) s/o Mbongo (1) who lived at Piti. Ewale a Mbedi (2) is the eponymous ancestor of the Duala (“Dwala”) proper and migrated from Piti to Douala, which was then dominated by the Basaa and/or Bakoko. Here Ewale himself or one of his descendants first made contact with Europeans (it is significant to note that the Basaa/Bakoko traditions make no claim to initiating such contacts).⁷ About six generations after the time of Ewale, the leadership of the Duala was divided between the major segments of Bell/Bonanjo and Akwa/Bonambela. After this point, the contact between Duala and Europeans became so close that we do not need to rely on oral tradition as our major source of narrative data, a condition that the informants who supplied the earliest accounts seem to have acknowledged by supplying little information on the time after the ascendance of the first “King Akwa” (8A).

The focus of the present chapter is thus the period described most fully by Duala oral tradition. If we had to rely entirely on that source, we could still be confident of possessing at least some sense of historical events in the era covered. The tradition presents an account of the Duala past which is quite plausible because it is not very pretentious in either chronological or ideological terms. In both a positive and negative sense it is more of a history (or at least a genealogical chronicle) than a myth. The space encompassed by the migration of Ewale is precisely the kind of local trajectory that critics have alleged lies behind the tales of distant origins in other oral traditions of this region, at least as they appertain to the present millennium.⁸ The time frame is also rather limited and lacks the gap between original ancestor and more recent figures that is characteristic of more lofty foundation stories.

Heroic themes are not only absent from Duala oral traditions but their possibility actually appears to be suppressed. Thus neither Mbedi, Ewale or any of the migration leaders are endowed with any larger-than-life qualities and the reasons given for their departure from Piti are not very dramatic or consistent. While some accounts do state that the Basaa/Bakoko were forced out of Douala, there is little sense here of “conquest”; several Duala traditions even concur with Bakoko accounts

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Table 2.2. *Variants of the Duala oral tradition*

Date recorded	Inland origin(s)	Generations (Mbongo to Mbedi Bele)	Sons of	Reasons for departure	Relations with Basaa/Bakoko	Encounter Europeans
Smith ¹ 1863	West of Mt. Cameroon		Koli, Dualla		“Expelled the Basas from their dwellings on the Cameroons river”	
Grentfèl ² 1882	Lungassi (near Piti)			Expelled by Lungassi people, move to Estuary, learn to fish	Move to source of floating plantain skins, trade for fish, then drive Basaa into forest	
Pauli ³ 1884 Flad ⁴ c. 1890	Lungassi Masongo → Piti	5 10	Kole, Duala, Bojongo, Balimba, Ewori, Bakoko, Ebonji	Wanderlust (from Masongo); Kole-Duala quarrel over chicken and canoe prow (Piti) Duala marries daughter of uncle who forces all sons of Mbedi out Mbongo war w. Lungassi; Piti either short of food or Duala quarrels w. Mbedi over first imported cloth	Trade fish w. Bakoko and settle peacefully; eventually use force to take land	Ndoko of Bonambela allows Bonaberi to deal w. Europeans but Ngando Akwa claims same status Duala and Bojongo meet Europeans, send Mapoka s/o Duala to Europe
Halbing ⁵ c. 1905	Piti	7	Duala		Settle peacefully w. Basaa, then cheat them at trade	First encounter Bojongo meets ship while fishing but Duala, as senior, controls trade