

Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers

The Duala and their Hinterland, c. 1600–c. 1960

The Duala people entered the international scene as merchant-brokers for precolonial trade in ivory, slaves and palm products. Under colonial rule they used the advantages gained from earlier riverain trade to develop cocoa plantations and provide their children with exceptional levels of European education. At the same time they came into early conflict with both German and French regimes and played a leading – if ultimately unsuccessful – role in anti-colonial politics. In tracing these changing economic and political roles, this book also examines the growing consciousness of the Duala as an ethnic group and uses their history to shed new light on the history of “middleman” communities in surrounding regions of West and Central Africa. The authors draw upon a wide range of written and oral sources, including indigenous accounts of the past which conflict with their own findings but illuminate local conceptions of social hierarchy and their relationship to spiritual beliefs.

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*The Duala and their Hinterland,
c. 1600–c. 1960*

Ralph A. Austen and Jonathan Derrick



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Preface

The writing of this book has occupied well over twenty years, although both authors have simultaneously been involved in numerous other projects. The research and writing of chapters 2–4 is entirely the work of Ralph Austen. Chapters 5 and 6 are based on research and drafts by Jonathan Derrick, with additional research and the final writing undertaken by Ralph Austen.

In the course of our efforts we have both become heavily indebted to a great number of oral informants, research assistants and colleagues. Help on specific matters is acknowledged in our many footnotes but recognition beyond these formal courtesies must be extended to at least some institutions and individuals. These include the staffs of the many Cameroonian, British, Dutch, French, German and Swiss archives (governmental, missionary and private) in which we worked (the archives are specified in the bibliography).

In Cameroon we both benefited from the help of various members of the History and Geography Departments of the University of Yaoundé as well as the staffs of the American Cultural Center and the Goethe Institute. In Douala, we both owe special thanks to Father Eric de Rosny, SJ for personal support of various kinds and, in Ralph Austen's case, to the Collège Alfred Saker, the Procure Catholique, Louis Bissek and Martin Njeuma for lodging and other help. Jonathan Derrick is similarly obligated to Jean-Emile Mba and the late Achidi Ndifang in Douala and Dierk Lange in Paris and especially to Xavérie Kobla (now Mrs. Derrick). Although most of our interviews were carried out directly in English, French or German (a direct benefit of the Duala middleman past) Ralph Austen's work in the Littoral hinterland could not have been possible without the help of his assistant and interpreter, the late Moukouri Ndoumbe "Papa" Mbambe.

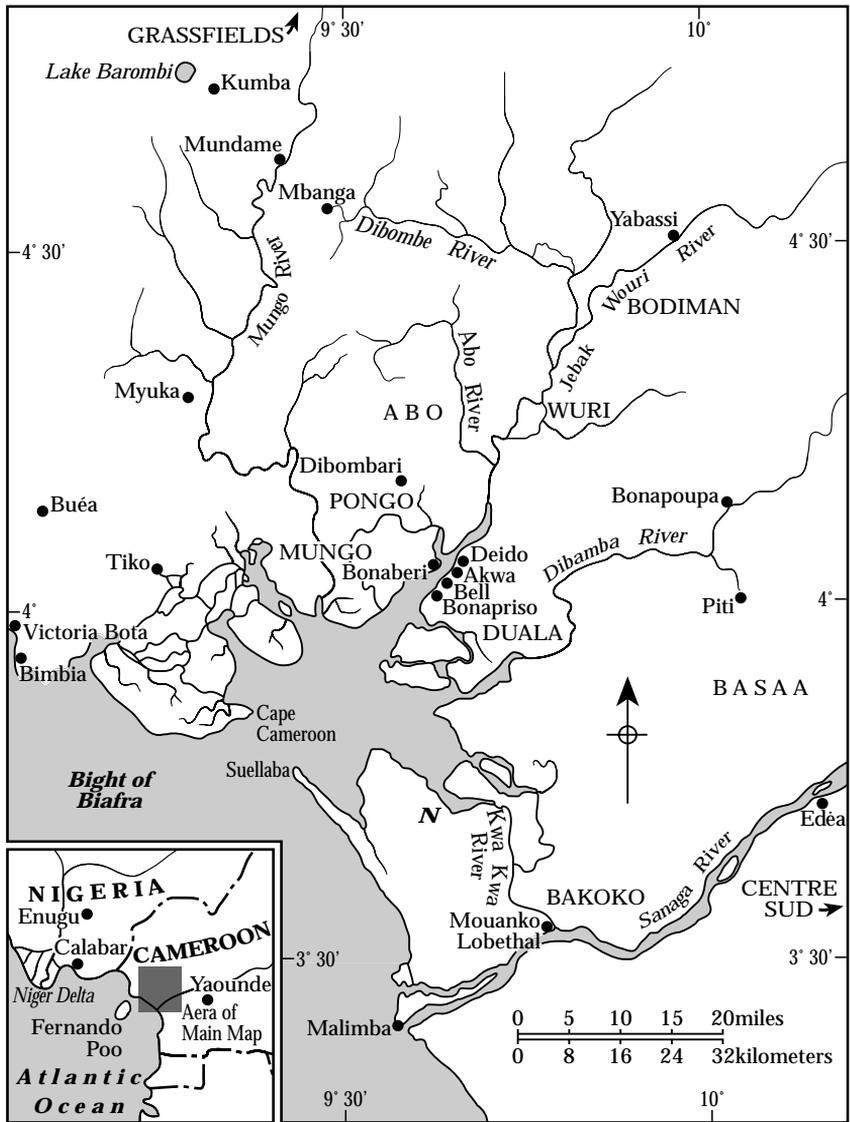
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Abbreviations

AA	Auswärtiges Amt [German Foreign Office]
ALME	Archive of Léopold Moumé Etia, Douala
ANC/FA	Archives Nationales du Cameroun, Fonds Allemands, Yaoundé
ANC/FF	Archives Nationales du Cameroun, Fonds Français, Yaoundé
ANSOM	Archives Nationales, Section d'Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France
BFA	Bell Family Archives, Douala
BGF	Buea German Files, Cameroon National Archives, Buea
BMG	Basler Missionsgesellschaft archives, Basel, Switzerland
<i>BMH</i>	<i>Baptist Missionary Herald</i>
BMS	Baptist Missionary Society, London
Calprof	Calabar Provincial Files, Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan
<i>CEA</i>	<i>Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines</i>
CO	Colonial Office files, Public Records Office, Great Britain
CSO	Central Secretariat Office Files, Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan
FO	Foreign Office files, Public Records Office, Great Britain
ISH	Institut des Sciences Humaines, Yaoundé
<i>JAH</i>	<i>Journal of African History</i>
JME	Journal des Missions Evangéliques
<i>JOC</i>	<i>Journal Officiel du Cameroun</i>
NBC	Native Baptist Church
PMC	League of Nations, Permanent Mandates Commission
PP	Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, Sessional Papers
<i>RFHOM</i>	<i>Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre Mer</i>
RKA	Reichskolonialamt files, Deutsches Bundesarchiv, Potsdam
RT	Germany, <i>Verhandlungen des Reichstags</i> [Reichstag debates and papers]
SMEP	Société des Missions Evangéliques de Paris
UPC	Union des Populations du Cameroun



Map 1 The Cameroon Littoral, c. 1977. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press. Words in full capitals indicate ethnic groups.

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

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*

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

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.