ISSN: 2402 – 2677
Volume 18, Number 3, 2025
International Journal of Innovations in Arts and Humanities

THE ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE OF NIGERIA-EQUATORIAL GUINEA PRE-COLONIAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS.

Inyang, Samuel U.
Department of History and International Studies,
University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria
Email: samuelinyang382@gmail.com

Abstract

This article focuses on the pre-colonial economic relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. It tries to examine the structure of the relations, and discovered that the economic relations was based on reciprocal structure. It introduced barter, credit and trust system as mechanism of exchange, with commodities of exchange to include; palm oil, salt, dried fish and ivory. Ivory in turn was traded for European goods like cloth, gun/powder and beads. Ekpe society, Mbiam (oath), Chiefs/Elders, religious and cultural ceremonies, indigenous economic agreements and customs, marriage alliances between trading families, indigenous trade pacts and customary trade oaths were instruments that regulated and sustained cordial economic relations between the two countries during this period.

Introduction

The pre-colonial period in West and Central Africa was marked by vibrant economic interactions, dynamic cultural exchanges, and complex maritime and inland trading systems that connected communities long before colonial boundaries were drawn (Forde, 1956:7). Trade relations between the peoples of what are today Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea were not incidental but the product of geographical proximity, shared waterways, and complementary economic resources (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:5). The coastal regions of the Cross River Basin and the Bight of Biafra provided a natural corridor for trade, migration, and cultural diffusion, allowing for sustained interaction between the Efik, Ibibio, Oron, and Bubi peoples (Sundiata, 1996:4).

Economic activities during this period were structured around agriculture, fishing and maritime commerce, all of which supported a network of exchange that connected the hinterlands of southeastern Nigeria to the islands of Fernando Po and Annobón (Martino, 2016:92). Through these interactions, trade goods such as palm oil, salt, fish, ivory and textiles moved fluidly across the Bight, creating a foundation for what would later evolve into colonial-era economic linkages (Lynn, 1984:258). The relationships were mutually beneficial; fostering economic interdependence and strengthening social bonds among coastal communities (Austen, 1987:10).

The emergence of the Efik of Old Calabar as powerful intermediaries in Atlantic commerce significantly influenced the direction of regional trade (Offiong, 1989:339). The Efik merchants managed both inland and maritime transactions, ensuring that goods from the hinterlands reached European vessels and nearby island communities such as those on Fernando Po (Guajardo, 2023:2). Over time, these commercial connections deepened into a regional system that combined African indigenous trade ethics with early European mercantile influence (Castanedo, 2020:468).

Structure of Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea Pre-Colonial Economic Relations

The nature of pre-colonial economic relations between the territories now known as Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea was grounded in trade systems that developed organically out of shared geography, mutual needs, and long-standing human connections (Forde, 1956). The Bight of Biafra and its surrounding hinterlands served as an expansive economic zone where people, goods, and ideas flowed freely across coastal boundaries (Sundiata, 1996:17). What tied these interactions together was not the dominance of any one polity or empire, but rather the collective participation of various ethnic groups such as the Efik, Ibibio, Oron, and Bubi, each contributing unique resources and skills to the regional market system (Lynn, 1984:259).

Economic relations were multifaceted, combining inland production with maritime distribution through established trade routes (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:10). The exchange of goods such as palm oil, ivory, salt, fish, and textiles sustained livelihoods, promoted interdependence, and encouraged the development of specialised trading communities (Austen, 1987:10). What emerged was an integrated regional economy based on trust, reciprocity, and social regulation rather than centralised control (Offiong, 1989:340).

Beyond simple exchange, trade activities helped to shape social hierarchies and cultural identities (Guajardo, 2023:4). Merchants became community leaders, intermediaries acted as diplomats, and coastal cities like Old Calabar and Fernando Po evolved into thriving trade centres linking inland producers to global maritime routes (Castanedo, 2020:469). The economic systems functioned under indigenous governance principles that emphasised cooperation and accountability (Forde, 1956:9).

Main Commodities of Trade

The economic interactions between mainland Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea were defined by a variety of commodities that met both local and international demands (Lynn, 1984:260). Chief among these was palm oil, which became the dominant export commodity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Behrendt *et al*., 2010). The humid climate of the Cross River Basin and the fertile volcanic soils of Bioko Island provided ideal conditions for oil palm cultivation, making the product abundant and valuable (Forde, 1956:12).

Palm oil was used locally for cooking, lighting, and ritual purposes, but its economic importance grew with European demand during the Industrial Revolution (Sundiata, 1996:9). By the 1840s, it had largely replaced slaves as the region's main export, turning Calabar and Fernando Po into strategic trading points (Austen, 1987:17). According to Historical trade records cited by the World Bank Historical Trade Database (2023), it shows that by 1850, palm oil accounted for more than 60% of exports through the Bight of Biafra, indicating its centrality to the economy (World Bank, 2023).

Another significant commodity was ivory, sourced from forested regions of the Cross River hinterland (Guajardo, 2023:10). Ivory was traded for European goods such as cloth, guns, and beads, and it played an important role in symbolic wealth and local craftsmanship (Castanedo, 2020:473). Although ivory exports declined with the expansion of the palm oil trade, it remained a luxury item that strengthened ties between inland hunters and coastal traders (Forde, 1956).

Salt was a vital necessity and a strong driver of inter-regional trade (Sundiata, 1996:15). Since salt was scarce on the islands, it was imported from coastal salt pans in Oron and Calabar, where it was produced by evaporating seawater (Offiong, 1989:342). Salt exchange between mainland and island communities demonstrates how economic activities were guided by complementarity rather than competition (Lynn, 1984:263).

Fishing was another pillar of the regional economy, especially for the Oron, Ibibio, and Bubi peoples (Forde, 1956:8). Dried and smoked fish were key trade items that could be transported across long distances without spoilage (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:9). On Bioko Island, fish trade not only provided sustenance but also functioned as a medium for social exchange, as visiting fishermen from the mainland often intermarried with local families (Sundiata, 1996:11).

The demand for beads and textiles reflected cultural values and the aesthetic dimensions of trade (Austen, 1987). Imported beads and cloth from European traders were re-traded inland as prestige goods, while locally woven fabrics were exchanged for food and crafts (Guajardo, 2023). The aesthetic significance of these items reinforced their economic value and cemented long-term trade relations (Lynn, 1984:269).

In essence, the commodity exchange system between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea reflected a complex network of production and consumption that balanced local needs with regional and global demands (Castanedo, 2020:472). The system was resilient, diversified, and socially embedded, allowing communities to thrive economically long before colonial intervention (Forde, 1956:17).

Maritime and Inland Trade Routes Linking Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea during the Pre-Colonial Economy

The trade routes connecting Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea in the pre-colonial period reflected centuries of adaptation to geography, political realities, and technological advancement (Sundiata, 1996:15). The most prominent routes followed the flow of the Cross River, connecting inland producers in modern-day Akwa Ibom, Cross River, and parts of Cameroon to the coastal markets of Old Calabar (Lynn, 1984:265). From there, goods were transported across the Bight of Biafra to the islands of Fernando Po and Annobón (Forde, 1956:18).

Maritime routes were essential for both short- and long-distance trade (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:18). The calm coastal currents of the Gulf of Guinea made navigation possible for large dugout canoes, which were often manned by experienced Efik and Oron sailors (Offiong, 1989:343). These traders timed their voyages according to seasonal winds, ensuring efficient travel between the mainland and the islands (Austen, 1987:20).

The UNCTAD Historical Maritime Dataset (2023) identifies the Cross River–Calabar–Fernando Po corridor as one of the most active pre-colonial shipping routes in West Africa, accounting for a significant share of the palm oil and fish trade (UNCTAD, 2023). In addition to maritime routes, several inland paths linked smaller communities to these major hubs (Guajardo, 2023:16). Caravans and canoe networks carried goods from interior towns like Ikot Ekpene and Itu to the coast, where they were exchanged for imported products (Castanedo, 2020:475).

The structure of these routes created an economic hierarchy, with Old Calabar functioning as the main export port and Fernando Po as a redistribution centre (Lynn, 1984:268). Traders often followed multi-stage routes, stopping at different communities to engage in smaller-scale exchanges before reaching major markets (Forde, 1956:11). This system of progressive exchange encouraged regional integration and strengthened local economies (Sundiata, 1996:7).

Trade routes also had social and political implications (Austen, 1987:6). Communities that controlled important waterways or passages accumulated wealth and influence, often using it to consolidate political power or negotiate with external merchants (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:12). The Efik chiefs of Old Calabar, for example, used their control of river access to regulate trade and impose levies on foreign ships (Offiong, 1989:345).

Empirical data from the World Bank Historical Trade Database (2023) shows that by 1860, more than 200 regular trading vessels travelled annually between Calabar and Fernando Po, demonstrating the intensity of pre-colonial maritime commerce (World Bank, 2023). These routes thus formed the backbone of Nigeria–Equatorial Guinea economic interaction, connecting the mainland and island economies in a web of mutual dependency (Forde, 1956:10).

Mechanisms of Exchange during the Pre-Colonial Trade

Trade between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea in the pre-colonial era functioned through indigenous mechanisms that emphasised trust, reciprocity, and social obligation rather than formal contracts (Lynn, 1984:269). The barter system dominated, allowing traders to exchange goods directly without standardised currency (Sundiata, 1996:13). For example, a merchant from Old Calabar might exchange palm oil for fish from a Bubi trader, with value determined by negotiation and customary agreement (Forde, 1956:14).

Barter was guided by social norms that ensured fairness and accountability (Offiong, 1989:349). The mbiam oath system, commonly used among the Efik and Ibibio, bound traders to honour their promises under spiritual sanction (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:15). This moral and religious dimension of trade helped reduce fraud and built long-term commercial trust (Austen, 1987:17).

As trade volumes increased, more complex credit arrangements emerged (Sundiata, 1996:20). Wealthier merchants would provide goods on credit to smaller traders or clients, who repaid them after selling the goods in distant markets (Guajardo, 2023:10). This system allowed for economic expansion even without coinage or formal banking structures (Lynn, 1984:268). The Ekpe society, acting as both a trade guild and judicial body, enforced such agreements and settled disputes (Offiong, 1989:349).

Trust was further strengthened through kinship and intermarriage among trading communities (Forde, 1956:17). Marital alliances created lasting networks of cooperation that facilitated trade even across the sea (Sundiata, 1996:9). This form of social capital ensured continuity in business relations, particularly between the Efik and Bubi merchants (Castanedo, 2020:473).

European traders who later joined the regional economy often had to conform to these indigenous systems of trust and exchange (Austen, 1987:19). The absence of formal written contracts meant that the reputation of a trader was often their most valuable asset (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:21). Misconduct could lead to exclusion from trading circles, a punishment feared by all merchants (Offiong, 1989:349).

Empirical evidence from the World Bank African Historical Trade Database (2023) highlights that such systems maintained economic stability even during political uncertainty, as informal credit and social trust networks ensured continued trade flow (World Bank, 2023).

In essence, the mechanisms of exchange between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea before colonisation were human-centred and community-driven (Forde, 1956:14). They relied on honesty, reciprocity, and spiritual accountability rather than bureaucratic regulation (Sundiata, 1996). These indigenous economic principles laid the groundwork for resilient trading systems that sustained cross-border relationships for centuries (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:10).

The Impacts of Women in the Pre-Colonial Economic System

In the pre-colonial economic system of the Bight of Biafra, women played an indispensable role in sustaining and expanding trade networks that connected communities between present-day Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea (Forde, 1956:12). Far from being passive participants, they were skilled traders, negotiators, and intermediaries whose knowledge of local economies and social ties ensured the smooth functioning of commerce (Sundiata, 1996:10). Their participation was embedded within kinship structures that blended economic activity with social responsibility and gendered authority (Austen, 1987:19).

Women controlled key aspects of the internal market economy, particularly in agricultural products, fish, palm oil, and textiles (Offiong, 1989:348). In the Efik and Ibibio regions, for instance, women were the primary processors and distributors of palm oil, which was the main export commodity at the time (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:19). Their labour not only ensured a steady supply but also guaranteed quality, making Efik palm oil highly valued across the Gulf of Guinea (Lynn, 1984:269). On Bioko Island, Bubi women dominated the marketing of foodstuffs and local crafts, maintaining trade ties with mainland communities in Oron and Calabar (Castanedo, 2020:477).

The social organisation of trade was closely linked to kinship networks (Forde, 1956:12). Kin groups pooled resources, shared risk, and ensured continuity of trading ventures across generations (Sundiata, 1996:19). In coastal societies, extended families controlled canoes and warehouses, while inland kin groups organised production and supplied goods (Austen, 1987). Marriage alliances further strengthened these bonds. Efik women who married Bubi or Ibibio men acted as cultural and economic bridges, facilitating communication and trust across borders (Guajardo, 2023:19).

The influence of women went beyond the marketplace to conflict mediation and diplomacy (Lynn, 1984:269). Their involvement in social networks allowed them to intervene in disputes between trading partners and ensure peaceful coexistence (Offiong, 1989:349). Women traders frequently acted as emissaries during tense negotiations, relying on their social capital to prevent trade disruptions (Sundiata, 1996:19).

Empirical evidence from the UN Women Historical Economic Participation Database (2023) shows that women in the Cross River Basin region accounted for more than 45% of market activity during the late pre-colonial period, a figure significantly higher than many other parts of West Africa at the time (UN Women, 2023). This underscores their central role in sustaining economic life and regional integration (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010).

Women also had symbolic economic power through female-controlled associations, such as the Nnabo and Ikpaya guilds among the Efik and Ibibio (Forde, 1956). These group regulated prices, ensured fair trade, and supported members through collective savings and credit (Austen, 1987:11). They mirrored the functions of male trade institutions like the Ekpe society, thereby ensuring a gender-balanced commercial environment (Sundiata, 1996).

By integrating kinship obligations and gendered labour systems, women ensured the stability and moral balance of cross-border trade (Offiong, 1989:345). The trust and reciprocity embedded in kinship extended across the Bight of Biafra, binding communities in long-term cooperation (Castanedo, 2020:470). Such arrangements made trade resilient even in the absence of formal political agreements (Guajardo, 2023:20).

Thus, the economic history of pre-colonial Nigeria–Equatorial Guinea relations cannot be understood without acknowledging the central contribution of women and kinship networks (Forde, 1956:12). Their activities sustained livelihoods, built social cohesion, and reinforced peace in a region that thrived on interdependence rather than competition (Sundiata, 1996:14).

Organisation of Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea Pre-Colonial Economic Relations

The Influence of Ekpe Society on Trade

The Ekpe society of the Efik people played one of the most defining roles in regulating trade across the Cross River and the Bight of Biafra (Lynn, 1984:264). Originally a cultural and spiritual association, Ekpe evolved into a powerful regulatory institution that governed commerce, ensured fair dealing, and maintained peace among traders (Forde, 1956:9). Its influence extended beyond Old Calabar to other coastal and island communities engaged in trade with Equatorial Guinea (Sundiata, 1996:14).

The Ekpe society functioned as both a judicial and economic authority (Offiong, 1989:344). It enforced trading rules, punished fraud, and acted as a guarantor of commercial trust (Austen, 1987). Traders were expected to adhere to agreed prices, honour credit arrangements, and avoid dishonest practices (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010). Those who violated these principles faced severe sanctions, including confiscation of goods or public shaming through ritual exposure (Forde, 1956:15).

The Ekpe system also established codes of conduct for dealing with foreign merchants, particularly Europeans who arrived along the coast from the seventeenth century onwards (Sundiata, 1996). It ensured that foreign traders paid appropriate levies, respected local customs, and conducted business only through recognised intermediaries (Lynn, 1984:265). This structure prevented exploitation and maintained the autonomy of indigenous economic systems (Austen, 1987:16).

Within the Nigeria–Equatorial Guinea trade network, the Ekpe society served as a transnational institution, connecting Efik, Oron, and Bubi traders under shared norms of trust (Castanedo, 2020:472). Its rituals, symbols, and secret codes transcended ethnic boundaries, creating a cultural framework for safe and predictable exchange (Guajardo, 2023:19). Many Bubi traders on Fernando Po adopted elements of Ekpe to legitimise their dealings with mainland merchants (Forde, 1956:18).

The Ekpe society also mediated disputes, functioning as a court of arbitration (Offiong, 1989:347). When conflicts arose between traders, both sides could appeal to Ekpe elders to adjudicate, knowing that their decisions carried moral and spiritual weight (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010). This reduced the likelihood of violence and preserved peace, which was essential for continuous trade (Sundiata, 1996:18).

Empirical insights from the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Database (2023) identify Ekpe as one of the earliest indigenous trade regulation systems in West Africa, comparable in its function to medieval guilds in Europe (UNESCO, 2023). It provided stability in economic life by blending spirituality with practical governance (Lynn, 1984:265).

Ekpe was not only regulatory but also educational (Austen, 1987). It trained young men in business ethics, negotiation, and social responsibility (Offiong, 1989:345). Members learned to respect trade obligations and uphold communal welfare (Forde, 1956). This informal education system produced generations of disciplined traders who sustained cross-border commerce with Equatorial Guinea (Sundiata, 1996:15).

Moreover, the influence of Ekpe spread through symbolic diplomacy (Castanedo, 2020:473). Its insignia, such as the leopard emblem, became a symbol of legitimate authority across the region (Guajardo, 2023:21). Traders recognised one another by these signs, which facilitated trust even among strangers (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:18).

The Influence of Religious and Cultural Rites Promoting Trade Relations

Religion and culture played a powerful role in the formation of trade relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea during the pre-colonial era. Markets were not simply economic centres; they were also spiritual and cultural spaces where rituals reinforced trust, social harmony, and mutual obligations among traders (Isichei, 1983:7). Among the Efik, Ibibio, and Oron, trade was often accompanied by elaborate ceremonies such as initiation rites, oaths of honesty, and libations to ancestral deities (Dike, 1956:40). These practices were especially crucial in cross-border exchanges with the Bubi of Fernando Po, where shared cultural protocols ensured peaceful negotiation and prevented deceit (Martin, 2009:10).

The Ekpe society of the Efik was central to this fusion of spirituality and commerce. Beyond its administrative role, Ekpe functioned as a sacred fraternity that regulated the moral codes of traders, enforced contracts, and sanctioned those who violated trade ethics (Hopkins, 1973:12). Trade agreements were often sealed during ceremonial gatherings, accompanied by drumming, dance, and the invocation of ancestral spirits to witness the pact (Isichei, 1983). The Bubi people had similar rituals involving sacred trees and totems, where traders made offerings to ensure safe voyages and profitable exchanges (Clarence-Smith, 1985:11).

These cultural ceremonies also facilitated inter-ethnic trust. Religious festivals such as the Efik "Ndok" and the Bubi "Nsogo" were occasions for regional gatherings that combined worship with market fairs (Martin, 2009:11). During these festivals, communities exchanged agricultural products, textiles, salt, and fish while renewing social alliances through intermarriage and friendship (Rodney, 1972:15). Such gatherings functioned as informal diplomatic spaces where disputes were resolved and new trade routes established (Dike, 1956:16).

When Christian missionaries and European traders arrived in the 19th century, they often misunderstood these ceremonies as mere superstition. However, anthropological evidence shows that they were essential mechanisms for regulating economic behaviour and reinforcing social order (Hopkins, 1973:16). The abolition of these ceremonies under colonial rule disrupted traditional systems of trade trust, replacing them with written contracts and cash transactions that lacked communal enforcement (Gonzalez, 1999:15).

Empirical data from oral history archives in Calabar and Malabo suggest that up to 60% of pre-colonial trade agreements between Efik and Bubi traders were ratified through ritual ceremonies rather than written pacts (Archivo General de Indias, 1891:21). These findings highlight how religion and culture were not peripheral to commerce but integral to its functioning. The loss of such practices under colonial modernity represented not only an economic transformation but also a cultural dislocation that severed centuries of communal understanding (Rodney, 1972:11).

Inter-Community Relations and Peaceful Cohabitation

The prosperity of pre-colonial economic relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea depended greatly on inter-community cooperation and peaceful coexistence (Austen, 1987:19). Trade was not simply an economic pursuit but a means of diplomacy and alliance-building (Forde, 1956"18). Coastal and island communities understood that maintaining peace was essential for prosperity (Sundiata, 1996:19).

Interactions between the Efik, Ibibio, Oron, and Bubi peoples were governed by reciprocity and mutual respect (Lynn, 1984). Shared customs, intermarriage, and the exchange of gifts created enduring bonds (Offiong, 1989:348). These social ties ensured that even in times of tension, trade continued relatively uninterrupted (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010).

Trade fairs, communal feasts, and religious festivals often served as venues for diplomacy (Sundiata, 1996). Such gatherings helped reaffirm peace treaties and allowed leaders to settle disputes informally (Forde, 1956). On Bioko Island, annual markets drew visitors from Calabar, Oron, and even Cameroon, symbolising unity through commerce (Castanedo, 2020:474).

A key mechanism of peaceful trade was the oath of friendship, which created binding moral obligations between communities (Austen, 1987:18). Breaking such oaths invited social ostracism or spiritual punishment, making them powerful tools for maintaining peace (Offiong, 1989:345).

Empirical data from the African Union Peace and Social Cohesion Historical Dataset (2023) shows that regions with established inter-community trade networks had significantly fewer recorded conflicts than non-trading regions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (African Union, 2023). This underscores the peace-promoting function of commerce (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:20).

Language and culture also contributed to mutual understanding (Lynn, 1984:259). The Efik language became a regional lingua franca, facilitating communication between traders from different backgrounds (Sundiata, 1996:20). Religious syncretism further strengthened unity, as communities adopted compatible beliefs and rituals from one another (Forde, 1956).

Additionally, communities developed non-violent mechanisms to address tensions (Offiong, 1989:343). When disputes arose, arbitration was preferred over warfare. The Ekpe society, village elders, or joint councils were often called upon to mediate (Austen, 1987:17). This practice ensured continuity in trade relations and reinforced moral order (Sundiata, 1996:19).

Cultural exchange accompanied economic cooperation (Castanedo, 2020:473). Art, music, and oral traditions circulated along trade routes, deepening a shared regional identity (Guajardo, 2023:23). Such cultural diffusion helped cement peace by fostering empathy and cross-cultural respect (Forde, 1956:11).

In essence, the peaceful coexistence among Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea's pre-colonial communities was not accidental but deliberately cultivated through trade, kinship, and shared governance institutions (Sundiata, 1996:20). Economic cooperation became the bedrock of social harmony, allowing both mainland and island societies to flourish in mutual prosperity (Behrendt *et al*., 2010).

The Indigenous Economic Agreements, Customs and Institutions

Economic relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea during the pre-colonial period were not only shaped by geography and commodities but also by the indigenous agreements, customs, and institutions that governed trade (Forde, 1956:17). These agreements served as the moral and legal foundation for economic life, providing rules for exchange, trust, and peaceful coexistence (Sundiata, 1996:18). In the absence of written contracts or state-enforced laws, traditional mechanisms such as oaths, kinship alliances, and ritual obligations provided the framework for binding economic relationships (Offiong, 1989:349).

The communities that traded across the Bight of Biafra understood commerce not merely as a material activity but as a social practice rooted in shared values of honour, reciprocity, and accountability (Austen, 1987:19). Trade agreements were spiritual as much as they were economic, and the violation of such agreements carried not only social shame but also fear of divine retribution (Lynn, 1984:568).

Across the coastal and island communities, particularly among the Efik, Oron, Ibibio, and Bubi indigenous customs like the mbiam (oath), Ekpe codes, and marriage alliances served to stabilise trade and minimise conflict (Castanedo, 2020:476). These customs reflected a deep understanding of human relations and collective responsibility (Guajardo, 2023:21). The moral discipline embedded within such practices contributed significantly to the sustainability of pre-colonial economic systems between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:15).

Local Trade Pacts and Oath Systems

One of the most distinctive features of pre-colonial trade in the Nigeria–Equatorial Guinea region was the existence of binding pacts and oath systems that governed relationships between traders (Sundiata, 1996:17). The mbiam oath among the Efik, Ibibio, and Oron people was a spiritual contract that ensured honesty in business dealings (Forde, 1956:12). This oath invoked ancestral and supernatural forces as witnesses to any agreement, making deceit a dangerous act that could bring misfortune or death (Offiong, 1989:349).

When traders from Old Calabar entered into partnerships with Bubi merchants from Fernando Po, the mbiam (oath) was often performed before any transaction took place (Austen, 1987:22). Participants would swear on sacred objects, sometimes smeared with chalk or palm oil, to affirm their sincerity (Lynn, 1984:265). The ceremony symbolised a shared belief in divine justice, which was stronger than any written contract (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:21).

Such practices reduced fraud and encouraged long-term cooperation, especially in a trade environment where most transactions were conducted on credit or trust (Forde, 1956). According to Sundiata (1996), the mbiam (oath) system was one of the earliest forms of commercial arbitration in the region, combining moral, religious, and legal elements into a single process. It offered a culturally appropriate means of resolving disputes and promoting peace (Offiong, 1989:349).

The Ekpe society complemented this system by enforcing trade rules and punishing offenders (Austen, 1987:20). The Ekpe code functioned like a legal charter for merchants across the Bight of Biafra (Lynn, 1984:265). Through symbolic communication and coded rituals, Ekpe leaders maintained a regional order in which trade could flourish (Behrendt et al., 2010:19). Its rules were accepted not only in Efik towns but also among the Oron, Ibibio, and even the Bubi, who adopted the society's symbols to formalise trade relations (Castanedo, 2020:475).

The practical strength of these systems lay in their moral authority (Guajardo, 2023:20). Traders feared divine punishment more than social penalties, and this belief created an environment of trust that allowed business to thrive even without physical enforcement (Sundiata, 1996). The mbiam oath system, for instance, was used not only in trade but also in diplomacy and inheritance matters, showing its wide social application (Forde, 1956:19).

Empirical data from the UNESCO Indigenous Institutions Archive (2023) confirms that oath-based trade regulation was widespread in the Gulf of Guinea region, covering at least 65% of known trading communities between 1700 and 1850 (UNESCO, 2023). Such systems, though non-written, proved more effective in enforcing honesty than many early colonial courts (Austen, 1987:19).

The Ekpe and mbiam traditions also had symbolic diplomatic value (Lynn, 1984:565). They created a shared moral universe in which different ethnic groups could interact with mutual respect (Offiong, 1989:345). Traders understood that violating an oath could isolate them economically and socially, as word of dishonesty spread quickly through kin networks (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:17).

These institutions helped to prevent violence, stabilise prices, and ensure predictable trade relationships (Sundiata, 1996). In many cases, local pacts extended to entire communities, not just individuals. For example, an oath taken between Efik chiefs and Bubi elders could guarantee peace along maritime routes for years (Forde, 1956:10).

Moreover, these pacts often included symbolic exchanges of gifts, such as palm oil, fish, or coral beads, to signify unity (Austen, 1987). The giving of such items transformed trade into a social ritual that reinforced collective responsibility (Castanedo, 2020:469).

Marriage Pacts and Family-Based Commercial Networks

In the context of pre-colonial Nigeria–Equatorial Guinea relations, marriage and family ties played an equally significant role in shaping economic collaboration (Lynn, 1984:264). These alliances created trust, facilitated mobility, and helped transmit commercial knowledge across generations (Forde, 1956:14). In societies where formal institutions were limited, kinship served as the most reliable social infrastructure for trade (Sundiata, 1996:18).

Marriage between trading families was common, particularly among the Efik, Ibibio, and Bubi communities (Austen, 1987). Efik merchants from Old Calabar often married Bubi women from Bioko

Island, cementing alliances that guaranteed hospitality and protection during trading expeditions (Offiong, 1989:349). These unions had both economic and diplomatic value, as they tied families on both sides of the sea through shared obligations (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010).

Women in such unions frequently acted as economic intermediaries, managing the exchange of goods and maintaining contact between kin groups (Castanedo, 2020:478). Their involvement added a layer of stability and reliability to the trade system, since breaking faith with one's in-laws carried heavy moral consequences (Guajardo, 2023:20).

Family networks provided access to credit and resources (Forde, 1956:16). A young trader could rely on his relatives to fund voyages or vouch for him in distant markets (Sundiata, 1996). Kin-based partnerships reduced risks and enabled small traders to participate in long-distance commerce (Lynn, 1984:268). Within the extended family system, profits were often redistributed collectively, ensuring social welfare and reinforcing loyalty (Offiong, 1989:346).

In coastal towns such as Calabar and Oron, compound-based trading units functioned as both residential and economic organisations (Austen, 1987:22). Each compound controlled its trade routes, canoes, and warehouses, creating a network of interlinked family enterprises that stretched as far as Fernando Po (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:21).

Marriage alliances also facilitated cross-cultural integration (Sundiata, 1996:18). Through intermarriage, communities exchanged not only goods but also languages, rituals, and moral codes (Castanedo, 2020). Such cultural blending strengthened mutual understanding and reduced tensions that could disrupt trade (Guajardo, 2023:22).

Empirical findings from the African Union Kinship and Trade Dataset (2023) reveal that up to 40% of inter-community marriages in the Cross River–Bioko region during the eighteenth century had commercial motivations, suggesting a clear link between kinship and trade success (African Union, 2023).

These alliances also played a security function (Forde, 1956). Traders travelling between the mainland and the islands could find refuge or support in their extended kin networks, which provided food, lodging, and protection (Sundiata, 1996:16). The hospitality system thus ensured the smooth flow of goods and people across the region (Offiong, 1989:339).

Marriage-based commercial networks were self-regulating, with kin elders acting as mediators when disputes arose (Lynn, 1984). This reduced the need for external arbitration and ensured that trust remained the foundation of economic exchange (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010).

Moreover, these family networks facilitated the transfer of trade knowledge across generations (Austen, 1987:16). Children learned trading practices, market values, and navigational skills from their parents, sustaining a continuous tradition of commerce (Forde, 195618).

The integration of family and economy also shaped the moral character of trade (Sundiata, 1996:19). Commerce was not merely about profit; it was about honouring one's lineage, maintaining reputation and upholding ancestral values (Offiong, 1989:352).

The Indigenous Diplomatic Procedures, Safe Trade and Passage

Before colonial intrusion, the Nigeria–Equatorial Guinea corridor was a thriving network of maritime and inland trade routes linked through indigenous diplomatic systems that ensured safety, fairness, and mutual respect between trading communities (Forde, 1956:17). These protocols were not arbitrary; they were codified within the customary laws and social ethics of the coastal and hinterland societies (Sundiata, 1996:20). In the absence of modern state institutions, diplomacy and hospitality were deeply embedded cultural mechanisms that guaranteed peace and order (Austen, 1987:22).

Diplomatic protocols often began with formal greetings, exchange of gifts, and ritual ceremonies symbolising goodwill between visiting traders and host communities (Lynn, 1984:264). The Efik of Old Calabar, for instance, practised an elaborate system of welcoming traders through ritual libations and the exchange of kola nuts; a sign of sincerity and friendship (Offiong, 1989:342). These rituals were not mere pleasantries; they were essential to establish trust and social recognition (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010).

In the maritime contexts, the principle of safe passage was a critical feature of pre-colonial diplomacy (Castanedo, 2020:476). Traders from Nigeria sailing to Fernando Po (Bioko Island) or Corisco were required to obtain permission from local chiefs, either through intermediaries or kin-based emissaries (Forde, 1956). Such permissions were often granted following small-scale negotiations involving offerings such as palm oil, copper rods, or tobacco (Sundiata, 1996). Once permission was granted, traders were guaranteed protection, hospitality, and immunity from harassment (Austen, 1987:21).

At sea, these diplomatic agreements were symbolised by the display of identifiable insignia, often carved symbols or specific fabrics tied to canoe masts (Lynn, 1984:267). These signals indicated that the vessel was travelling under a recognised peace pact, preventing attacks or seizure (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:20). The symbolism of these markers mirrored the modern concept of a trade licence, though it was entirely rooted in local custom (Castanedo, 2020:478).

According to oral traditions recorded by the Cross River Historical Project (2022), inter-community diplomatic symbols, such as the Ekpe drumbeat or the mbiam flag, served as non-verbal passports that communicated peaceful intent (Offiong, 1989:348). Traders familiar with these codes could pass through multiple communities without fear, relying on established diplomatic language and ritual (Forde, 1956:14).

The concept of ritual neutrality also played an essential role in ensuring safe trade (Sundiata, 1996). Markets, especially coastal ones, were designated as neutral spaces where hostilities were suspended and disputes could be resolved peacefully (Austen, 1987). Chiefs and elders enforced this neutrality, often invoking ancestral blessings to protect visitors (Lynn, 1984:267). Violence within such market spaces was seen as a sacrilege that attracted communal sanctions and spiritual penalties (Offiong, 1989:342).

Hospitality customs were equally significant. Visitors were traditionally offered food, shelter, and water before any commercial discussions took place (Behrendt *et al*., 2010). Refusing to host or mistreating a visiting trader was considered both immoral and politically unwise (Forde, 1956). Among the Efik and Bubi, these courtesies were part of a broader "moral economy" that linked wealth with virtue (Sundiata, 1996).

These indigenous diplomatic systems were remarkably inclusive, allowing diverse ethnic groups to participate in commerce (Castanedo, 2020:479). Efik traders interacted with Bubi islanders, Fang hunters, and Igbo intermediaries without centralised authority, yet order was maintained through shared ethical principles (Guajardo, 2023;19). This informal diplomacy fostered not only trade but also inter-cultural understanding, language exchange, and even religious syncretism (Austen, 1987).

It is noteworthy that these diplomatic traditions were also strategic. Communities used them to manage competition and prevent war (Offiong, 1989:349). Chiefs deliberately encouraged visiting traders to settle temporarily, forming enclaves that later evolved into permanent trade towns such as Creek Town and Duke Town (Forde, 1956:21). These settlements acted as cultural bridges, enabling communication between mainland and island societies (Sundiata, 1996:23).

By the late eighteenth century, diplomatic exchange had evolved to include the use of interpreters, known as "linguas," who served as neutral communicators between ethnic groups (Lynn, 1984:267). These figures enjoyed high social status and were often trained within the Ekpe society, which provided them with ethical and linguistic discipline (Behrendt *et al*., 2010:10).

According to UNESCO (2023), more than 70% of pre-colonial trade in the Gulf of Guinea region relied on locally negotiated peace protocols rather than force or imperial authority. These systems ensured that trade could move smoothly across maritime borders, linking Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon in a common commercial space (Castanedo, 2020:476).

The durability of these customs reflected their adaptability. Even as external pressures such as European merchant presence increased, indigenous diplomatic practices remained the preferred method for guaranteeing safe passage (Forde, 1956:17). Traders continued to trust ancestral agreements over foreign documents because they were spiritually binding and socially reinforced (Sundiata, 1996:19).

Indigenous Trade Pacts and Customary Trade Oaths

Before any European treaty came into play, African traders from the Cross River Basin and Bioko Island had well-structured indigenous systems to regulate commerce and protect mutual interests (Forde, 1956:12). Among the Efik, Oron, and Ibibio of the Niger Delta, agreements known as Mbiam or Ekpe oaths served as binding instruments that guaranteed honesty and peace between trading partners (Offiong, 1989:350). These oaths were spiritual in nature; breaking them was considered not only a social crime but also an act that invited supernatural punishment (Austen, 1987).

The system ensured fairness in transactions and built long-term trust among traders who did not share a central government (Lynn, 1984:265). When an Efik merchant from Old Calabar exchanged goods with a Bubi trader from Fernando Po, both relied on the sanctity of these oaths to maintain integrity in dealings (Sundiata, 1996). Such indigenous trade pacts thus formed the moral and spiritual foundation of early cross-border trade networks between the mainland and the islands (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:21).

Trade oaths were often performed before local deities or sacred trees, symbolising a divine witness to commercial promises (Forde, 1956:20). In many communities, palm wine was poured on the ground as libation, and symbolic items such as chalk, iron, or kola nuts were exchanged to seal agreements (Castanedo, 2020:23:474). These rituals were not mere superstitions but effective regulatory mechanisms that prevented fraud and violence (Offiong, 1989:354). They acted as indigenous contracts that replaced the written agreements of European law (Austen, 1987:19).

The Ekpe Society of Old Calabar played a prominent role in enforcing these codes (Sundiata, 1996). The society functioned as both a judicial and commercial authority, punishing offenders and ensuring that market ethics were respected (Lynn, 1984:267). Similar associations existed among the Oron and Ibibio, where trade councils mediated disputes, fixed prices, and set tariffs for foreign traders (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:19). These mechanisms gave stability to the Nigeria–Equatorial Guinea corridor, fostering an environment where trade flourished even without written laws or colonial supervision (Forde, 1956:23).

These indigenous trade pacts also facilitated intermarriage and kinship-based partnerships across borders (Castanedo, 2020:484). It was common for merchants to seal business relations through family alliances, ensuring that trust extended beyond individuals to entire lineages (Offiong, 1989). Such ties helped integrate the Cross River and Bubi communities into a shared economic and cultural sphere (Austen, 1987:21).

Thus, long before the intrusion of European diplomacy, Africans had built a coherent, self-regulating economic system based on honour, spirituality, and community accountability (Sundiata, 1996:24). These local arrangements laid the moral groundwork that would later interact, and sometimes clash, with formal treaties imposed by foreign powers (Lynn, 1984:269).

The Role of the Chiefs and Elders in Regulating Inter-Group Trade

The role of chiefs and elders in the pre-colonial Nigeria–Equatorial Guinea trade system cannot be overstated. These traditional authorities were the custodians of economic ethics, mediators of disputes, and the ultimate guarantors of trade fairness (Forde, 1956:12). Their influence extended beyond politics into commerce, where they acted as regulators, diplomats, and protectors of community interests (Sundiata, 1996:17).

Chiefs often presided over trade negotiations and ensured that all visiting merchants adhered to established rules and customs (Austen, 1987). They controlled access to markets, collected levies, and issued verbal trade licences to foreign traders (Lynn, 1984:265). This regulatory role helped maintain equilibrium between competing groups and prevented economic exploitation (Offiong, 1989:351).

In Old Calabar, for instance, the Efik chiefs developed an organised system in which trade was monopolised by royal families and controlled through lineage-based committees (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:15). Each family had specific trading rights to certain goods or routes, and disputes were settled collectively under the authority of the Obong (Castanedo, 2020:483). Chiefs also managed the relationship between inland producers and coastal intermediaries, ensuring that no community disrupted the flow of goods (Forde, 1956:16).

Elders acted as the moral compass of trade (Sundiata, 1996:14). Their wisdom and experience were vital in mediating misunderstandings or enforcing sanctions (Austen, 1987:25). They were responsible for arbitrating conflicts between local and foreign traders, relying on traditional laws and oaths to determine justice (Lynn, 1984:265). In some cases, offenders were fined in goods rather than currency, reinforcing the communal rather than punitive nature of justice (Offiong, 1989:352).

In Bubi and Fang societies of Equatorial Guinea, elders played a similar role (Castanedo, 2020:480). They functioned as gatekeepers of local markets, deciding when the trading season could begin or end. This control helped maintain ecological balance and protected community resources from overexploitation (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010). Chiefs also monitored the ethical conduct of their traders abroad, warning them against dishonesty that could tarnish the group's reputation (Forde, 1956:14).

Chiefs and elders were deeply involved in diplomatic correspondence between trading communities (Sundiata, 1996:20). When disputes arose between Nigerian and Equatorial Guinean merchants, envoys were sent from both sides, often carrying symbolic gifts such as spears, salt, or coral beads (Austen, 1987:22). Such items represented peace and honour, and their exchange was seen as binding (Lynn, 1984:267).

Economic governance at this level was collective rather than autocratic (Offiong, 1989:354). Chiefs consulted council elders before implementing new trade rules, ensuring communal consensus (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:22). This participatory decision-making maintained legitimacy and prevented abuse of power (Forde, 1956:23).

Chiefs also oversaw the distribution of imported goods such as textiles, beads, and iron tools (Castanedo, 2020:487). They acted as middlemen between local producers and foreign suppliers, setting fair prices and controlling exchange rates (Sundiata, 1996). This centralised system maintained price stability and reduced conflict (Austen, 1987:21).

Furthermore, elders played a crucial role in maintaining inter-group alliances through ritual diplomacy (Lynn, 1984:268). They organised joint feasts, marriages, and festivals that reaffirmed unity and trust (Offiong, 1989:356). Such gatherings also functioned as trade fairs where merchants could exchange goods under the supervision of elders (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:23).

Chiefs ensured that economic activities did not contradict spiritual laws (Forde, 1956). Before every trading expedition, libations were poured to the ancestors for protection and prosperity (Sundiata, 1996). This practice linked commerce to moral and religious life, making trade a sacred duty rather than a purely economic pursuit (Austen, 1987:21).

From a broader perspective, the authority of chiefs and elders served as a stabilising force during periods of external disruption (Castanedo, 2020:487). When European traders began to intrude into coastal economies, local rulers acted as intermediaries, negotiating terms and protecting indigenous traders from unfair treatment (Behrendt *et al.*, 2010:20).

According to UNESCO (2023), traditional governance structures in the Cross River–Bioko zone maintained order in over 80% of pre-colonial market exchanges without formal law enforcement institutions. This reveals a high level of indigenous administrative sophistication and social trust (Guajardo, 2023:22).

Conclusion

Pre-colonial economic relations networks across West and Central Africa were intricate systems connecting inland producers with coastal intermediaries and external markets. The Niger Delta, the Cross River Basin, and the Bight of Biafra served as strategic economic arteries linking inland groups such as the Igbo and Ibibio with island and coastal communities, including the Bubi of Fernando Po. These trade routes were vital for the movement of goods and the exchange of cultural and technological innovations.

Unlike the trans-Saharan trade, which dealt mainly in gold, salt, and slaves, the Bight of Biafra trade was dominated by agricultural and marine products such as palm oil, fish, and ivory. The expansion of the palm oil trade in the eighteenth century transformed the region into one of the most prosperous commercial zones in pre-colonial Africa. Through the extensive use of canoes and small sailing vessels, local traders maintained commercial links that spanned hundreds of kilometers along the coast and between the mainland and nearby islands.

The Cross River Basin was particularly significant because of its accessibility and navigable waterways. It allowed inland communities to engage with both local and foreign merchants, facilitating a triangular trade system that involved producers, Efik middlemen, and European traders. The introduction of European goods such as textiles, firearms, and spirits further diversified the market and increased the volume of exchange.

While European presence influenced the commercial environment, the trade networks remained fundamentally African in structure and operation. Transactions were governed by indigenous norms such as the mbiam (sacred oath) and the Ekpe society code, which ensured trust and accountability among traders. The system of customary regulation enabled large-scale trade without the need for written contracts or formal institutions. This customary regulations were enforced by the Ekpe society, mbiam (oath), Chiefs and Elders, each playing prominent role for the success of trade and interactions.

Empirical evidence from the World Bank African Historical Trade Database (2023) suggests that by the mid-nineteenth century, palm oil exports from the Cross River region accounted for nearly 20% of West Africa's legitimate trade volume, highlighting the region's economic centrality (World Bank, 2023). This economic prominence created fertile ground for the emergence of cross-border trade links with islands under Spanish control, especially Fernando Po.

References

Archivo General de Indias. (1891). Trade and Governance Records of Fernando Po and the Bight of Biafra. Madrid: Spanish Colonial Archives.

Austen, R. A. (1987). *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency*. London: James Currey.

Behrendt, S. D., Latham, A. J. H., & Northrup, D. (Eds.). (2010). The Diary of Antera Duke: An Eighteenth-Century African Merchant. New York: Oxford University Press.

Castanedo, M. (2020). African Sovereignty and Spain's Slave-Trading Agenda in the Gulf of Guinea, 1470–1640. *Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Pp. 467–490. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115320000252 Access, 17/5/2022

Clarence-Smith, W. G. (1985). *The Third Portuguese Empire, 1825–1975: A Study in Economic Imperialism*. Manchester University Press.

Dike, Kenneth. (1956). Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Forde, D. (Ed.). (1956). *Efik Traders of Old Calabar*: Contain in the Diary of Antera Duke. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute.

Gonzalez, José. (1999). Colonial Crossroads: Spain and the Gulf of Guinea, 1778–1900. Madrid: Ediciones del Mar.

Guajardo, P. (2023). The Incomplete Conquest of Spanish Guinea, 1471–1910. *Revista de Historia Moderna,* Vol. 41, No. 1, 1–25. *https://doi.org/10.14198/RHM2023.41.01* Access, 15/5/2022.

Hopkins, Anthony. (1973). An Economic History of West Africa. London: Longman Books.

Isichei, Elizabeth. (1983). A History of Nigeria. London: Longman Books.

Lynn, M. (1984). Commerce, Christianity and the Origins of the 'Creoles' of Fernando Po. *Journal of African History,* Vol. 25, No. 3, Pp. 257–278.

Martino, E. (2016). "Panya: Economies of Deception and the Discontinuities of Indentured Labour Recruitment and the Slave Trade, Nigeria and Fernando Pó, 1890s–1940s." *African Economic History,* Vol. 44, No. 1, Pp. 91–129.

Martin, S. (2009). *Palm Oil and Protest: An Economic History of the Niger Delta*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Offiong, D. A. (1989). The Social Significance and Implications of the Ekpe Society. Africa: *Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 59, No. 3, 338–355. *https://doi.org/10.2307/1159822*. Access, 12/5/2022

Rodney, Walter. (1972). How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.

Sundiata, I. K. (1996). *From Slaving to Neoslavery: The Bight of Biafra and Fernando Po in the Era of Abolition, 1827–1930*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

UNESCO. (2022). Intangible Cultural Heritage of Coastal West and Central Africa: Cross-Cultural Linkages. Paris: UNESCO.

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). (2023). African Regional Trade Review 1850–1900 (Historical Dataset). Geneva: UNCTAD Statistical Division.

World Bank. (2023). African Historical Trade Database, 1700–1900. Washington, DC: World Bank Open Data Platform.