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# Geo-Strategic and Historical Linkages as Major Factors for the Growth of Female Trans-border Trade Along the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom Corridor between Cameroon and Nigeria, 1988– 2016

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Trans-Border  
Trade,  
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Corridor.*

In some parts of Africa, women have been conspicuous along trade routes and very active in trans-border commerce for many years. This phenomenon is not uncommon along the borders between Cameroon and its neighbours as was the case in the trans-border trade between Cameroon and Nigeria, especially along the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom trajectory. It is rather unfortunate that some scholars tend to undermine the role of women along this route as they have erroneously stigmatised them as commercial sex workers (prostitutes) blaming it on the economic crisis that rocked the foundations of national and local economies in various parts of Africa. This study, however, sets out to examine the geo-historical dynamics that disposed women into trans-border trade in the said corridor. With the aid of primary and secondary sources and the use of qualitative analysis using the interdisciplinary approach, various conclusions denoted. The article underscores the view that the natural milieu and historical linkages of the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor predisposed women into trans-border trade given the proximity and socio-cultural ties of the border communities. The findings reveal that women involvement in trans-border trade within the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor was rather a natural integration into the historical process of human interactions in a definite geographical setting. The natural environment provided the material conditions for the increased involvement of women in trans-border trade in the area. It is hoped that this perspective shall debunk the stigma associated with misinterpretation of the presence of women in the said trajectory and to rather raise awareness of the women's ability and legitimacy in exploiting the opportunities in trade along the area. It will, therefore, serve as an eye-opener to policymakers to rethink and to valorise women's contribution in trans-border trade within the corridor.

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## INTRODUCTION

African women have always occupied a crucial slot and continue to play active roles in trade fluxes in different parts of the African continent. Women involvement in Trans-border trade within the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor was remarkable and conspicuous in the years 1988-2016. Some scholars have associated this phenomenon with prostitution and the economic crisis that affected the national and local economies as from the mid-1980s. This work further contends that the natural milieu and historical linkages of the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor predisposed women into trans-border trade giving the proximity and socio-cultural ties of the border communities. This is contingent on the fact that human activity is a decisive factor behind historical processes, but a definite natural environment is the objective material condition for the existence and development of human society (Mapkc, 1973). It is in this light that this article examines the location, population, and natural milieu and the historical linkages of the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom Corridor that fascinated some women to participate in trans-border trade along the said trajectory.

## LOCATION

The Mamfe XE "Mamfe-Ekok" corridor is the land that stretches from Many Division XE "Manyu

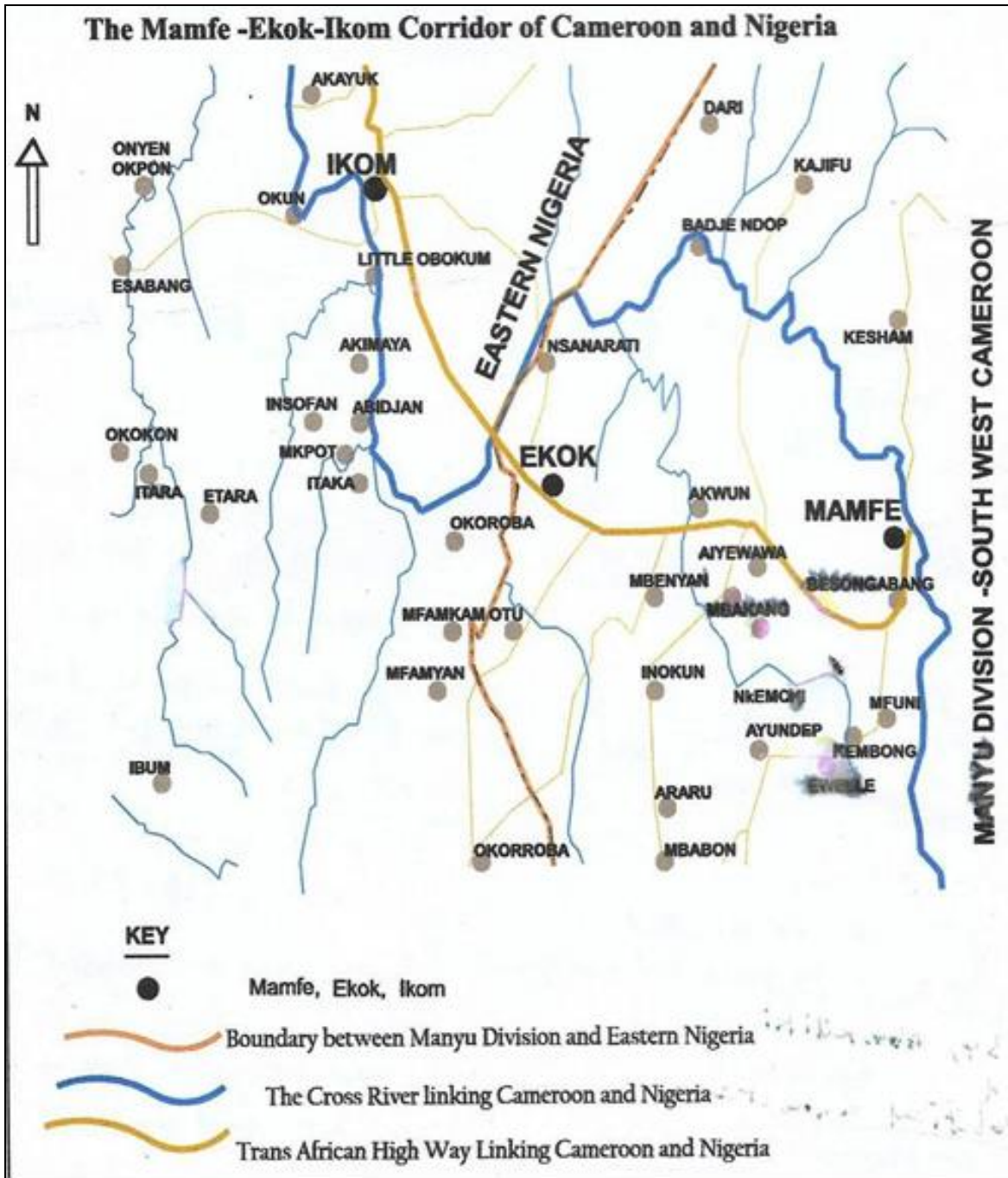
Division" in Southwest-Cameroon XE "Cameroon" XE "border" towards the Cross River XE "Cross River" State of South-eastern Nigeria. That is, the lower and upper parts of the Cross River that separate Cameroon and Nigeria (Hug, 1911). It is part of the 443 km Bamenda-Enugu Corridor XE "Corridor" (the Mombasa-Lagos trans-African highway No. 8. (African Development Fund, 2007). The Mamfe-Ekok portion is actually bounded to the East by Bamenda (Mezam Division) of the Northwest Region of Cameroon; to the South by Kupe Muanenguba, Meme and Ndian Divisions of Cameroon and to the West by, the Cross-River State of Nigeria (see *Figure 1*). The whole corridor is located in the Tropical Rain Forest. The custom checkpoints for both countries were and are still located at both ends of the Mfum Bridge that crosses over the Cross River. According to Ndeh (2017), the strategic positioning of this bridge was for security reasons and to thwart any illegal crossing of goods and persons at this point.

Such a strategic location favoured women XE "women" involvement in trans-border XE "border" trade XE "trans-border trade" in the area. This was because as a road junction with one road across to Bamenda, XE "Bamenda," one leading to Kumba and the Cameroon Coast and one towards Ekok at the Cameroon XE "Cameroon" -Nigerian border XE "border," Mamfe became an important centre for traffic that enabled the growth of trans-border

trade in the corridor XE “Mamfe” XE “trans-border trade.” But, until 2016, poor seasonal roads sometimes undermined these advantages same way as the current insecurity resulting from the clashes

between the Cameroon government forces and the secessionist fighters who want to cut off the English-speaking part of Cameroon (the Northwest and Southwest Regions).

**Figure 1: The Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom Corridor**



**Source:** Divisional Delegation of Land and Survey - Mamfe

Also, the proximity between the Cameroon border town of Mamfe-Ekok and the Nigerian town of Ikom, as shown in *Figure 1*, enabled traders in the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor to easily interact. As a result, many women traders interacted with industrious Ibo traders of Nigerian origin from whom they learned some trans-border trading strategies. Moreover, cross-border movements for trade and other purposes were influenced by the booming Nigerian economy as well as the socio-cultural and language similarities among the border communities XE “communities” of Ejagham XE “Ejagham,” Boki and Efik.

## POPULATION

According to the Provincial Services for Statistics, (National Institute of Statistics, 1998), the population of Manyu that embodies the Mamfe-Ekok area was estimated at 217,105 in 1998. However, statistics from the 2005 census showed a total population of 181,039 (Manyu Divisional Delegation of Economy, 2005). The drop in the figures could be attributed to the fact that the people of Fontem who were carved out of Manyu to form the Lebialem Division in 1992, were not included in the count. Meanwhile, the population of the Cross-River state where Ikom is located, XE “Ikom” on the Nigerian side stood at 2.89 million people as per the 2006 population census (Nigeria Information and Guide, Nigeria Galleri). Therefore, the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok-Ikom corridor constituted a huge population plus incoming traders and migrants from the Cameroon and Nigeria sides. This also provided a huge population of labour necessary for the production and exchange of goods and services within and across the border.

The large Nigerian market with its over 158 million consumers (World Bank Report, 2013), offers large opportunities for Cameroonian producers, as the Nigerian economy is set to continue to expand at a rapid pace. There was also a significant scope for Nigeria to expand exports XE “exports” of a number of locally produced manufacturing goods to Cameroon XE “Cameroon”.

## NATURAL MILIEU

The Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok indigenes of Manyu like their neighbours of the Upper Cross

River at Ikom XE “Cross River” consider land as a precious heritage owned by the community and cultivated by families. As such, it is difficult for a stranger from outside the village to buy a farm or get a plot for building within a village except in towns where the practice has relaxed. This is because the indigenes are not often ready to allow strangers to buy land or plant permanent tree crops which might give them some firm claim to the land. This attitude of the Manyu indigenes is contrary to the Cameroon XE “Cameroon” government’s regulation since 1974, which gave the government the rights to issue land titles or certificates. However, the conservation of community and family lands by succeeding generations gives room for sons and daughters to use lands to cultivable food XE “food” crops and to extract forest products of trade and monetary value.

Despite the patrilineal system of inheritance, women XE “women” in the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok-Ikom Corridor XE “Corridor” and the entire Cross River XE “Cross River” possess usufruct rights to cultivate on land as husbands usually give their wives patches of land for cultivation. In the case of polygamous families, children inherit only the piece(s) of land cultivated by their mothers referred to in the Ejagham XE “Ejagham” dialect as *ebagha ebe* (Interview with Clara Agbornde Assem, Ewelle Village, 20 July 2016). However, women who single-handedly cleared the forest owned the bush while women who are financially viable could also buy land as personal property (Interview with Alice Enow, Mamfe XE “Mamfe”, 23 December 2016). Thus, Women were blessed with abundant farmlands, which they exploited to obtain food XE “food” and trade items.

The Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok-Ikom corridor is situated within the equatorial region with a dense equatorial forest. As a result, it has a tropical climate with two distinct seasons – the rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season spans from the month of April to September with torrential rainfall (Niger-Thomas, 2001). The rainy season reaches its peak in the months of July and August, with rainfall approximated between 2000 mm and 4500 mm per year (African Development Fund, 2007). The mean annual relative humidity ranges between 76 per cent and 89 per cent (Zapfack et al., 2001). The dominant winds during this period are the South-

West Monsoon and the moisture-bearing type which provokes precipitation. As a result of heavy rainfall, the climate is humid. The dry season, on the other hand, covers the period from November to March, producing a temperature up to 30 °C. There are excessive sunshine and heat during this period with a mean annual temperature of 22°/2 5°C (Zapfack et al., 2001). The climatic conditions in Manyu and the entire Cross River XE “Cross River” areas influenced the women XE “women” to alternate some of their activities following the seasons. The climate also favoured the growth of oil palms, root crops like cassava and yam, cocoa XE “cocoa”, coffee, melon (*egusi*), *Irvingia gabonensis* (bush mango) and *Gnetum africanum* (*eru*) XE “*gnetum africanum* (*eru*)” exploited as food XE “food” and trade items.

In terms of soil, the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok-Ikom Corridor XE “Corridor” constitutes the central basalt plain, with a predominantly fertile soil producing rich crops such as cassava, yam, melon (*egusi*), maize, cocoyam and cocoa XE “cocoa.” The first four were and are still trade items and sources of income for domestic and trans-border XE “border” traders alike. Red clay and laterite are plentiful in the area. The red clay and laetrile are used for the construction of houses and this activity are facilitated by the women XE “women.”

The high temperatures, the variation of soil types, excessive sunshine and heavy downpours have led to the growth of a dense equatorial forest. The forest contains various types of trees such as *mahogany*, *ebony*, *iroko*, raffia, palm trees and camwood. Its forest also harbours various species of animals, seeds, ingredients and foodstuffs XE “foodstuffs” that served as trading items (Zapfack et al., 2001). Women in Mamfe-Ekok corridor XE, “Manyu Division” of Cameroon XE “Cameroon”, had always exploited non-timber resources XE “non-timber resources” such as *Gnetum africana* (*eru*) and *Irvingia gabonensis* (bush mango). The peak season for the gathering, splitting and sales of the sweet type of bush mangoes had always been from June to September while the bitter type was more available in the months between January and April. In the Mamfe-Ekok communities, *ogbono* was measured in and sold in small basins, and in Kumba, it is in buckets (Interview with Platini Ndip

Agbor XE “Platini Ndip Agbor”, Ewelle village, 15 July 2016). This could be found exported from Cameroon to Ikom but more in abundance at the Eke-Abu market in Abakiliki, Nigeria (Interview with Vero Njo Mbia, Kumba, 20 June 2017). Women spent days in the forest with their grown-up children to pluck *eru* while others engaged in the gathering and splitting of bush mango or harvesting of *Baillonella toxisperma* (*Njave*) (Interview with Mercy Enow XE “Mercy Enow”, Kumba, 20 July 2017). The harvesters, intermediates, and exporters involved in the *eru* value chain were mainly women, and the activity was always perceived as a women’s activity, partly because harvesting did not require owning land. The business was a key source of income for the household and for women’s empowerment (Ndip, 2019). The different species of animals hunted by hunters were a source of bushmeat that stimulated women XE “women” trans-border XE “border” trade XE “trans-border trade” as well.

The production of *egusi* (melon seeds) in the communities within the Mamfe- XE “Mamfe” Ekok-Ikom XE “Ikom” Corridor XE “Corridor” was a major source of income for women XE “women.” The women marketed great quantities of *egusi* to external buyers from Nigeria and Gabon, but they also used quite a good quantity for home consumption. At home, the melon seeds were cracked, ground and used to prepare soup, porridge plantain or cocoyam to feed their families. Also, at the end of every death ceremony, women cooked basins of *egusi* pudding bundled in leaves and referred to in the Ejagham XE “Ejagham” vernacular as, *etarh*. It was served to almost every person within the village as a traditional rite. The indigenes living in the Bayang and Ejagham villages used the melon leaves for the treatment of navel pain and stomach ache (*jeti jeti*) in children (Ndip, 2019).

The land area is flat with fewer or no mountain relief. Although there is evidence of hills, the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok-Ikom corridor is surrounded by forest and drained by many rivers and creeks. The area has a characteristic drainage pattern, which is dendrite in nature. Most of the streams spring up from the main Manyu River (Cross-River XE “Cross River”). This River originates from Widikum XE “Widikum” in

Cameroon XE “Cameroon” running through Mamfe where it takes the name, Manyu (Idem.).

The Manyu River (Cross River XE “Cross River”) flows through the swampy rain forest with numerous creeks and forms an inland delta near its confluence with the Calabar River (Maritime Organization of the West and Central Africa, 2008). The relief and drainage favoured the existence of salt ponds and fishing grounds exploited by men and women XE “women” several years before independence. In fact, locally made salt had once been a major trading item in the region. The Cross River has been navigable with boats and canoes. Male and female trans-border XE “border” traders used this route to transport goods to and from Nigeria during the raining season when the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok road was almost inaccessible (1945-2015).

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like other African countries, Cameroon XE “Cameroon” has been inhabited by a multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups since the pre-colonial era. They include the Bantus who constitute subgroups like the Bantus proper (Bakweri, Duala, Balong, Balondo, Fang Beti etc.); the semi-Bantu (Nso, Kom, Bafut, Bali, Bamum, Bamileke, Bayang, Ejagham XE “Ejagham”, Bangwa); the Pygmies, the Fulani, the Hausa, the Kotoko and the Shuwa Arabs (Ngoh, 2002). These groups constantly interacted in a network of trade exchange and established cultural and social affinities with their neighbours. This became an attractive force for the development of trans-border XE “border” trade XE “trans-border trade” in the colonial and post-independent reunified Cameroon.

In fact, during the pre-colonial era, subsistence agriculture was the main activity of the people of the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok-Ikom Corridor XE “Corridor” and trade was by barter. Until the nineteenth century, the main trade was the Atlantic slave trade as in most of West Africa. At its peak, the area from the Gold Coast to the Cameroons

accounted for 82 per cent of all slaves shipped from West Africa (Hopkins, 1973). After the middle of the seventeenth century, the slave trade spread eastward from the Gold Coast, and by 1800, the most important section of the coast for this trade was the part between Benin and the Cameroons. Slaves were marched to coastal entrepot, and Old Calabar was one of the leading slave ports for nearly 200 years, that is, 1650-1841 (Hopkins, 1973). Considering the position of Mamfe as a crossroad, much of the trade between the Bamenda Grasslands and Calabar passed through this area.

Even though trade existed mainly by barter during the pre-colonial era, it is probable that there was some sort of a money economy (Hopkins, 1973). This was practised among the Ejaghams who used European iron bangles locally called *Ebi-mbanga* to pay the bride price for their wives (Interview with Abbe A. Maga. Ewelle Village, 30 July 2016). It originated from the *Efiks* in Calabar whose chiefs acquired them from the early European traders they dealt with (Ikpe, 1992). Imports from Europe into West Africa consisted of cloth, guns and gun powder, hardware, salt, beads, tobacco, and rum. Also, a number of currencies such as cowries, manilas, iron bars, copper rods and silver dollars, together with gold were used in part or full exchange for slaves. Even in the hinterlands, there were constant struggles to gain control over the slave trade. In this light, the smuggling XE “smuggling” of slaves must have taken place.

During the colonial period, money was introduced, and European spheres of influence for trade were defined expanding even further into the hinterlands. Artificial boundaries XE “boundaries” were created which delimited trade. Hence, the German XE “German” and British colonial powers initiated a boundary demarcation for British Nigeria and German Cameroon XE “Cameroon” (between 1885 and 1893) from Rio Del Rey to the Cross River XE “Cross River” Rapids extending towards Yola and Lake Chad (Tajoche & Ndip, 2009). The said boundary line was readjusted between 1912 and 1913<sup>1</sup>. These boundaries cut across native areas and

<sup>1</sup>A detailed description of these boundaries XE “boundaries” between Cameroon XE “Cameroon” and Nigeria before 1916 is given in the protocol signed by Captain Nugent Ober, Lieutenant H. Detzner at Obukum on 12 April 1913 and ratified by an exchange of notes on

6 July 1914 between Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, and Prince Lichnowsky, the German XE “German” Ambassador. See C. Weladj, *The Cameroon – Nigeria Border* (Abba: Special Issue, 1978), pp. 173–193.

split communities. XE “communities” For example, the Ejaghams and Boki groups of Manyu (Cross River) were divided between Nigeria and Cameroon (Atem, 1984).

In the eyes of the new authorities, the transportation of goods and persons across official boundaries XE “boundaries” had to be followed by the implementation of trade restrictions. What had been normal for the local people suddenly became illegal (Niger-Thomas, 2001). These restrictions infringed on the ‘free trade’ that had once existed between the Efik traders of Calabar, Nigeria and the Ejaghams as middlemen in the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok borders XE “Ekok borders” of Cameroon XE “Cameroon”. The erstwhile free traders of Mamfe area now became smugglers, with women XE “women” remaining as yet outside this trade (Niger-Thomas, 2001).

Following the defeat of Germany in the First World War, in Cameroon XE “Cameroon”, Britain and France partitioned the territory. The British zone (British Cameroons) to which the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok corridor belonged, was ruled as part of British Nigeria for administrative convenience, cost reduction and the small nature of the territory, which Britain decided to tidy her Nigeria frontiers with. Thus, the British administrators opened the border XE “border” between Nigeria and the Southern Cameroons. This was further justified by the British administrators that, with inadequate economic resources, the British Cameroons were better-off being integrated with Nigeria so that they could “draw upon the financial and technical resources of Nigeria” (Chiabi, 2005).

With the fusion of Nigeria and the British Cameroons, there was an influx of Nigerians into Cameroon XE “Cameroon” and vice versa. In the post-World War II era, this flow of people continued. The opening of roads between Nigeria and Cameroon in 1945 especially between Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok and Ikom XE “Ikom”, increased movements. This was an era of normal trade as the British Southern Cameroons was part of Nigeria and there were no custom barriers XE “barriers” at the Cross River XE “Cross River”. The Cross River and the porous Nigeria-Cameroon border XE “border” formed the axis of trade. Very

little smuggling XE “smuggling” went on and only along the border to the east with French Cameroon where male traders smuggled French alcohol through the Mamfe-Ekok area on their way to Nigeria (Chiabi, 2005).

In 1961, the British Northern Cameroon XE “Cameroon” gained independence by integration with Nigeria while British Southern Cameroons gained Political independence by Reunification with the Republic of Cameroon (former French Cameroon). This was through a Plebiscite conducted by the United Nations. The socio-political and economic situation of the Southern Cameroonians changed, but cross-border XE “border” activities continued as usual.

The indigenes of Mamfe XE “Mamfe” Ekok communities XE “communities” in Manyu Division XE “Manyu Division” of Cameroon XE “Cameroon” is said to have migrated from the *Ekoi* stock of people in Eastern Nigeria. This is evident in the similarity of the Bayang and *Ejagham* XE “Ejagham” (*Keaka*) languages to the *Ekoi* (*Efik* and *Mbembe*) of Southeastern Nigeria (Ngoh, 2002, p.2). They also share many cultural traits with the *Mbembe* and *Efiks*, such as their masked societies. Language similarities and actual closeness to Nigeria made them to easily communicate, interact and trade with the Nigerians. This also made the Mamfe-Ekok people to be linked to a stronger economy – that of Nigeria, XE “Nigeria,” and an industrious group of people, the *Ibo*. Such interaction with Nigerians, especially the *Ibo*, developed trans-border XE “border” trading relations with ease. Some women XE “women” exploited this trading opportunity to their advantage during the post-independence era.

During the pre-colonial times, Mamfe XE “Mamfe” and the entire Cross River XE “Cross River” indigenes maintained a religious, social order through subcultures like *Ngbe/Ekpe*, *Mfam*, *Obassinjo*, *Angbu*, *Nkih*, *Ekpah*, *Njom-Ekpa*, *Nkim and Ndem*. The last five were women XE “women” dominated sacred societies which had a bearing upon the actions of women. This is because the cults hold sway over socio-economic and political matters. Membership into these cults was highly competitive, and the members were privileged. For example, bride price for women in *Ngbonga-Ndem*,

*Nkih*, *Nkim*, *Ekpah* and *Njom-Ekpah* were higher, they were sure to have husbands, and their families were held in high esteem (Arrey, 1998).

Apart from entertainment, *Ekpah* was known to provide social purification for the community, spiritual healing and a forecast of the future. It also provided an opportunity for public ritual expression while *Nkih* was used for protection. For example, during the *Mpawmanku* wars, two women XE “women”, M-Arrey Ekpo and M-Orang Arrah, used the powers of *Nkih* to produce an insurmountable rock (*Oso Allah*) that made it difficult for the Germans to capture the Ewelle community XE “Ewelle community” (in Eyumojock Sub-Division) (Arrey, 1998). By dancing naked in the night, the *Ekpah* women wielded considerable powers that were so often attributed to men (Ute, 2004). The *Ekpah* culture later spread and was popularly referred to as *Mawu*. It continued to exist in different villages for the protection of women interest and the community as a whole.

In fact, the dissemination of Female and male Associations (*Akum*) or cult agencies (*Ajom*) within the villages of the Cross River XE “Cross River” including the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok-Ikom Corridor XE “Corridor” was the result of buying and selling XE “buying and selling” from one community to the other. For example, the women XE “women” of Ajayukndip bought *Njom-Ekpah* from Ojok in Nigeria (Ute, 2004). They later sold the secret of this cult association to the women of Ewelle for 200,000 FRS excluding transport, food XE “food” and drinks (Ute, 2004). These cultural associations XE “cultural associations” created the demands for uniform wrappers, clothes and other costumes usually supplied by the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom women trans-border XE “border” traders.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” – Ekok indigenes believed and acknowledged the existence of a Supreme Being called *Obassi* – meaning God (in the Ejagham XE “Ejagham” dialect). They worshipped through shrines, sacred places, religious objects, art and symbols, myths and legends, music and dance, beliefs and customs, proverbs and riddles (Arrey, 1998). To make the presence of God realistic in their midst, they carved images and named them after the different sacred societies and shrines. For

example, *Obasinjom*, *Ngbe or Ekpe*, *Ekipinon*, *Mfam*, *Amok*, *Akiku* and *Nkih*. These sacred societies served the purpose of discipline, socialisation and entertainments. The Europeans who came to this part of Africa castigated these traditional practices as “*jujus*” or “*witchcraft*” (Arrey, 1998). This was because of the misinterpretation of their functions in spite of their role in regulating society. In an attempt to bring out their intrinsic values, Leke contends that:

*Traditional religiosity is founded in rituals, ceremonies and festivals of the people. Shrines, sacred places, religious objects, art and symbols, myth and legends, music and dance, beliefs and customs, proverbs and riddles are a plethora, of vehicles used in the acknowledgement of the existence of the Supreme Being. In as much as customs are not always religious, many contain religious ideas. Also, religion helps to strengthen and penetrate some of the customs, and in turn, the customs do the same to religion* (Leke, 2012, p. 19).

This goes to buttress the fact that there is some interconnection between the African culture and the Christian Religion as exhibited among the female traders in the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok-Ikom XE “Ikom” Corridor XE “Corridor”. Following, the introduction of Christianity in Cameroon XE “Cameroon” in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, many indigenes in these areas became Christian converts. They complemented tradition with Christianity manifested in orthodox churches like the Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Baptist. Ute and Chukwuzi (1996) assert that “the Christian churches complement the cultural and religious institutions of the Ejagham XE “Ejagham” people.” It is worth noting that some women XE “women” did exploit the Christian arena for education, health, and trade. In terms of trade, Christian groups placed high demands for loincloth (wrappers) and other wears from women trans-border XE “border” traders, which they used to sew their group uniforms.

Also, the mode of dressing of the Mamfe XE “Mamfe” -Ekok people influenced the women XE “women” involvements in trans-border XE “border” trade XE “trans-border trade”. The early people (women inclusive) wore backs of trees and



hides and skin to cover their genitals only (Interview with Abbe A. Maga, Ewelle Village, 20 July 2016). The pre-colonial women used hides and skin and later European pieces of cloths to make round skirts. The skirts had ropes which enabled them to tie around their waist. This was referred to as, *nkpen* (in the Ejagham XE “Ejagham” language). Girls or women from rich homes or princesses of royal blood wore the locally made *nkpen* with cowries on their heads and beads (*ajigija*) on the neck and around the waist (Idem.).

During the colonial and postcolonial period, the women XE “women” ’s mode of dressing changed because they were responding to modernity as their Nigerian counterparts did. For example, in the *Boki*, *Eba-Mbu* and *Ekoisam* clans of the colonial times, most women wore a necklace and a small piece of cloth tied around the waist just sufficient to cover their private parts, but the more progressive folks tied a longer cloth above the breast which falls to the knees (Assessment Report on the Boki, Ebammbu and Ekoisam Clans, 1924). The modern women in Manyu with two wrappers well fastened around the waist, with the bottom one lying at the ankles and the top one around the knees. The dressing is complemented with a distinctive knotted headgear (Interview with Ajan Ekuri, Agborkem Village, 30 July 2016).

The women XE “women” had various ways of knotting their headgears. The basic requirement was a piece of fabric that was at least a meter long and wide. The design came out better when a starched cotton material was used. The dexterity with which the women wrapped, twisted and tilted it brought out the designs, and there were many types (MOHWA, 2019). The creativity involved in the Manyu women’s dress was a source of inspiration to female seamstresses, designers and dressmakers in the pursuit of their careers. This also explains why the trade-in wrappers and headgears became very lucrative among the female trans-border XE “border” traders of the post-independent Cameroon XE “Cameroon”.

### **PRE-COLONIAL FREE TRADE XE “Trade” ZONES**

Anene (1969) argues that unlike the European imposed boundaries XE “boundaries”, pre-colonial

trade and movements in Africa occurred within zones or frontiers of contact, frontiers of separation and or enclaves which were not static. This signifies the nonexistence of state boundaries and trade barriers XE “barriers” during the pre-colonial times. No doubt before the Anglo-German XE “German” demarcation of the Cameroon XE “Cameroon” -Nigeria boundary in 1893, Cameroon was largely within the trade zone of many Nigerian communities (Efonagoro, 1979) XE “communities”. In Northern Cameroon, pre-colonial trade was characterised by the exchange of ivory, kola nuts, and slaves for leather, cloths, cowries, glass, utensils, and beads from Nigeria. The Bangwa-Bamileke and Bali traders in the Grassfields supplied slaves, ivory, kola-nuts, beans and tobacco from the hinterland (Efonagoro, 1979).

Meanwhile, Calabar developed as a commercial centre, a source of guns, and a plantation town (Efonagoro, 1979). The Efik of Calabar established trade contacts with the Balondo and Ejagham XE “Ejagham” from whom they received supplies of slaves, ivory and palm produce. Meanwhile, the Efik people, acting as middlemen, supplied a variety of European manufactures - alcoholic drinks, clothes, salt; utensils, iron goods, guns, and gunpowder to the Ejagham and Balondo (Efonagoro, 1979). A number of Efik chiefs made much wealth from this trade, amongst them were Chief Henshaw, Ephraim Yellow, Yellow Duke, and Ekpo Bassey of Duke Town. Yellow Duke is said to have owned over 3000 slaves (Ibid.). He maintained a trading base at Odobo and provided a fleet of canoes that sailed the creeks between Calabar and the Cameroon XE “Cameroon” coast, which traders of the post-independence era used as trade routes (Efonagoro, 1979).

### **INTERMARRIAGES**

Some women of the Mamfe-Ekok border communities were married to Nigerians and vice versa. The intermarried claimed dual nationality and they were naturally inclined to crisscrossing the borders to visit their relatives without any disturbances from the border officials of both Cameroon and Nigeria before and after independence (Ndip, 2019). Sometimes they bought trade items for sale in their dual border communities and crossed over claiming to visit

their homes. For example, Agbor Ayuk was married to a Nigerian husband called Kalu. Both of them were involved in lots of cross border movements to visit their relations while taking along with the goods for sale in the 1970s and 1980s. Also, Grace Okponpi, who was married to one Mr. Okponpi crisscrossed the Ekok-Ikom border to buy goods or pay visits without disturbances. Intermarriages were, therefore, a natural motivation and consequence of trans-border trade within the Mamfe-Ekok border communities (Ibid).

## CONCLUSION

This article has underscored the view that the natural milieu and historical linkages of the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor predisposed women into trans-border trade given the proximity and socio-cultural ties of the border communities. Human activity was indeed a decisive factor behind the historical process. However, a definite natural environment was the objective material condition for the existence and development of female trade-in Manyu Division of Cameroon. This was because the natural environment provided the material conditions for the growth of women trans-border trade in the area. Therefore, women involvement in trans-border trade within the Mamfe-Ekok-Ikom corridor was rather a natural integration into the historical process of human interactions in a definite geographical setting.

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