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**Article**

## A Colony of Opportunity: African Economic Intermediaries, Rubber, and Capitalism in German Colonial Cameroon, 1884-1914

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TRISTAN OESTERMANN

# A Colony of Opportunity

African Economic Intermediaries, Rubber, and Capitalism  
 in German Colonial Cameroon, 1884–1914

**ABSTRACT:** Taking German Cameroon as an example, this article uses the concept of the colonial intermediary to analyze Africans' role in colonial capitalism. While researchers have shown that the colonial state depended on Africans, the importance of African intermediaries in European trade has hardly been explored: European companies also depended on Africans for their business. The article argues that colonial capitalism in Cameroon was not only coercive but also opened new avenues for profit, social advancement, and accumulation for African traders, employees, and subcontractors. Studying the life histories of four African economic intermediaries, the article analyzes the opportunities of colonial capitalism, Africans' strategies of profit making, and Africans' role in colonial exploitation.

**Keywords:** intermediaries, colonialism, business, trade, Cameroon, rubber, capitalism, German colonialism

**JEL Codes:** N57, N77, N87, N97

## 1. Introduction

In c. 1902, James G. Mullen worked as a clerk in the offices of the Obuasi Mines in the British colony of the Gold Coast. One day, the Gold Coaster overheard a conversation of two colleagues. They talked about a job advertisement in a local African-run newspaper, the *Gold Coast Leader*, by the German rubber trading firm Krause & Fehrmann and the opportunities offered by the German colony of Cameroon in general: "We are all curious about this country which you speak about so much, and circumstances permitting, I should like to eke out of this stuffy dingy office, and go to this land where there seem such vast possibilities for a man with brains."<sup>2</sup> Mullen showed interest in working in Cameroon. On the next day, one of his colleagues handed over the advertisement to him and said: "You may go, and if you do I guarantee you will become richer than ever

1 In the digital version of the *Gold Coast Leader*, the job advertisement could not be found. See African Newspapers, <https://www.readex.com/products/african-newspapers-series-1-and-2-1800-1925>, last accessed: 25.04.2024. On Mullen see Newell (2008).

2 Mullen (2008), pp. 20 f.

you were, and the life is one that would suit you, I'd bet."<sup>3</sup> Mullen quit his job in the mine's office and bought a ticket for the next steamer to Cameroon.<sup>4</sup>

This is how Mullen himself described the start of his career as a rubber trader in the German colony of Cameroon. There, he managed trading factories, bought rubber for several companies, and stayed until the outbreak of World War One. In his account, published from 1916 to 1919 in the *Gold Coast Leader*, he depicts Cameroon as a wild and lawless frontier – a place where “Life was of little or no value,”<sup>5</sup> but also a place where one could get rich quickly: A place where “brave men, [...] tired of life and the tameness of things started off into the great bush to find new things”, which turned out to be “no bush at all, but a beautiful country full of young wives, fat cattle, game to hunt and enemies to kill.”<sup>6</sup> With its many opportunities, for Mullen Cameroon was “little less than an earthly paradise.”<sup>7</sup>

This account of Cameroon under German colonial rule, written by an African clerk, is at odds with how most researchers have described this specific colonial economy. With few exceptions, historians paint a gloomy picture – an interpretation captured best by L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan who labeled German Cameroon's economy as “Economics of coercion.”<sup>8</sup> Researchers have provided ample evidence that German officers, traders, and plantation owners exploited the African population, appropriated their lands and goods, and forced people to work.<sup>9</sup> On a larger scope, Mullen's account also contradicts most literature on the history of the African rubber industry, which is also widely identified with violence and forced labor. While there are a few nuanced studies,<sup>10</sup> the Congo Free State, where the rubber trade was indeed connected to violent forms of business, is generally seen as the *pars pro toto*.<sup>11</sup> Examples of Africans like Mullen remind us of the danger of Manichaean interpretations of colonialism and specifically of colonial capitalism, which replicate European fantasies of omnipotence, render Africans as passive and as a homogenous group, and which, most problematically, ignore and even deny African agency.<sup>12</sup> Many accounts on colonial economic history do not take into account Africans in intermediary positions. Actors like Mullen worked as agents for colonial companies. They did business with the local population on their employers' behalf. And as they used this intermediary position to acquire personal wealth, they profited from colonial rule and colonial capitalism.

3 Mullen (2008), p. 21.

4 Mullen (2008), p. 21.

5 Mullen (2008), p. 5.

6 Mullen (2008), p. 24.

7 Mullen (2008), p. 20.

8 Gann/Duignan (1979), p. 166.

9 See e.g. Mandeng (1973); Rüger (1960); Winkler (1960); Volz (1989); Clarence-Smith (1993); Chilver (1967); Möhle (1999). For a contrasting view see Wirz (1972); Oestermann (2023).

10 See Oestermann (2023); Vos (2015); Osborn (2004); Wirz (1972).

11 Tucker (2015). For studies on the Congo Free State and related rubber producing areas see e.g. Harms (1975); Harms (1983); Harms (2019); Hochschild (2012); Coquery-Vidrovitch (1972).

12 For a critique see Cooper (1994); Miller (1999); Krüger (2020).

This article uses the concept of the colonial intermediary to present a different perspective on Africans' role in colonial capitalism and capitalism in Africa.<sup>13</sup> I argue that colonial capitalism in Cameroon was not only European exploitation and coercion. Colonial rule and the colonial economy also opened new alleys for profit, social advancement, and accumulation for some Africans, especially for economic intermediaries like James G. Mullen. That colonial rule depended on African intermediaries is underlined by a growing body of scholarly literature.<sup>14</sup> As scholars have pointed out, colonial armies and administrations needed Africans who mediated between Europeans and African societies as interpreters, messengers, and clerks. They were much more than colonial underlings and collaborators. Europeans depended on their skill, knowledge, and initiative. Without them, colonial rule would have been impossible. In return, this dependency opened opportunities for African intermediaries. As Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L. Roberts put it, "[t]hose Africans with the ability to mediate and bridge the gap between the colonizers and the colonized occupied important and sometimes powerful positions in colonial Africa."<sup>15</sup> Africans working for the colonial state used their positions between colonizers and colonized "to influence the knowledge, interpretations and actions" of European officials,<sup>16</sup> but also to regulate the access of the local population to the ear of the colonial state. Thereby, they managed to create "unofficial corridors of power";<sup>17</sup> which sometimes allowed them to manipulate colonial rule to their own ends. Historians who have looked at African soldiers, policemen, and labor recruiters through the lens of the colonial intermediary come to similar conclusions. All these actors used their position within the colonial situation for their own good.<sup>18</sup> More often than not, African economic intermediaries thereby played an active role in exploitation and coercion.

African economic intermediaries like business clerks, employed traders, subcontractors, and others, however, have hardly received any attention from scholars so far. Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts explicitly exclude this group of intermediaries from their groundbreaking edited volume.<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Derrick just provides a brief sketch of their obvious importance.<sup>20</sup> And while Dmitri van den Bersselaar has written some of the few works on African white-collar business employees, he does not examine their intermediary position.<sup>21</sup> One reason for this neglect is the general lack of interest in the history of businesses in colonial history which left the activities of companies and their staff mostly out of the scholarly view.<sup>22</sup> Another one is the scarcity of sources on African

13 See e.g. Breckenridge (2021); Guyer (2004); Cooper (2014).

14 See the articles in Lawrance et al. (2006a); Austen (2011); Derrick (1983); Moyd (2014).

15 Lawrance et al. (2006b), p. 4.

16 Osborn (2003), p. 30.

17 Osborn (2003), p. 30.

18 Moyd (2014); Glasman (2016); Mark-Thiesen (2012).

19 Lawrance et al. (2006b), p. 5.

20 Derrick (1983).

21 Van den Bersselaar (2011); van den Bersselaar (2019).

22 Hopkins (1976a); Hopkins (1976b); Hopkins (1987); Tignor (2007); Austin (2017). For new publications on colonial business see e.g. Todzi (2023); Oestermann (2023); Kleinöder (2022).

economic intermediaries. As Ralph A. Austen has underlined, sources about any kind of African intermediaries are few, difficult to access, and often biased.<sup>23</sup> This is especially true for Africans who worked for colonial companies. While colonial government files can be consulted in public archives, many colonial firms went out of business and their papers were destroyed. Firms which survived often do not allow historians to access their collections. And in the case of granted access, it is never sure if records contain information on African employees, subcontractors, or other economic intermediaries.

This article reconstructs biographies, activities, roles, and strategies for accumulation of four different African economic intermediaries in the Cameroonian rubber trade from bits and pieces and often serendipitous finds in public and private archives as well as in historical publications. In Cameroon, many tens of thousands of Africans worked as intermediaries in the rubber trade. In 1912 alone, there were more than 20,000 registered traders in the colony.<sup>24</sup> Among these, the four individuals represent different kinds of economic intermediaries to be found in the rubber trade and, therefore, provide information beyond their individual fate: Elesä of Malimba was an independent trader who used his close connections to companies and the colonial government for his business. Martin Paul Zampa was a former colonial soldier who became an employee of the company of Randad & Stein. James G. Mullen was a West African migrant who worked as a trader for several rubber firms in Cameroon. Peter Mungeli, finally, was a teacher educated in Germany who entered the rubber trade as a subcontractor. All these economic intermediaries worked for European companies, traded with the local population, used this position for their own ends, and combined European as well as local models of profit and accumulation. This reconstruction of the history of African economic intermediaries offers new insights into how colonial capitalism worked on the ground. As the article shows, the daily business of the rubber trade in colonial Cameroon was mostly conducted by Africans who worked for European trading companies. They were the ones who bought and sold in the trading factories and in local villages. The history of these economic intermediaries shows that not only those employed by the colonial state, but also the many Africans who worked for the firms “acquired skills, knowledge, and situated authority with which they furthered their own strategies of accumulation.”<sup>25</sup> Often these intermediaries made their profits at the expense of others. By showing how African economic intermediaries profited from their position between European companies and the local population and how they used colonial rule for their own ends, this article offers a more nuanced picture of African agency in colonial capitalism.

23 Austen (2011).

24 Oestermann (2023), p. 461.

25 Lawrance et al. (2006b), p. 5.

## 2. Rubber, Capitalism, and the Rise of African Economic Intermediaries in Colonial Cameroon

The rise of African economic intermediaries in German Cameroon was enabled by the global rubber boom, set in motion by a series of innovations from tubes to seals, cable insulation, and tires, which, from c. 1890 on, made rubber an indispensable resource for industrializing societies. Global supplies of rubber could hardly match global demand as it had to be produced from various tropical trees and vines in scarcely populated rainforests. This led to ever rising prices. The consequence was a rush wherever rubber producing plants could be found.<sup>26</sup> Also the rainforests of what had recently become the colony of Cameroon developed into a rubber economy. The industry started around 1890,<sup>27</sup> shortly after the advent of colonial rule. Soon, rubber became Cameroon's most important export product. Since 1905, rubber made up roughly 50 % of all Cameroonian exports.<sup>28</sup> In 1911, Cameroon was the second largest exporter of rubber in Africa, second only to the Belgian Congo.<sup>29</sup> This rubber boom offered ample opportunities for economic intermediaries.

The dizzying growth of the rubber trade was made possible not only by rising prices for the raw material on the world market, but also by the structures of local capitalism. Southern Cameroon's rainforests, the colony's main source of rubber, had already been part of the Atlantic economy before the advent of colonial rule. Its main export product was ivory. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ivory trade – and thereby also political power – became monopolized by a limited number of Bulu, Beti, Ngumba, Mabea, and Batanga traders. In a complex system of exchange, they and their extended families, which were the basis of the local social and political order, traded the ivory from the elephant hunting grounds in the far interior to the coast, where Batanga traders sold it to Europeans.<sup>30</sup> Ivory was exchanged against European commodities: guns, powder, cloth, beads, salt, metal goods, and the myriad of other things which were part of the Atlantic trade. These commodities could be used for consumption, but also as currencies. Therefore, they could be invested.<sup>31</sup> The most important form of investment was acquiring control over people: While land was abundant in most parts of 19<sup>th</sup> century Africa, people who cultivated it were scarce. Therefore, rights over people were key for political, social, and economic power.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, southern Cameroon's ivory traders invested in slaves, but most importantly, they invested in bridewealth.<sup>33</sup> Since the start of the ivory trade, their access to highly valued European goods allowed rich traders to

26 Tully (2011); Harp (2016).

27 The rubber trade on Mount Cameroon which started earlier was rather short-lived. See Oestermann (2023), pp. 143 f. For an account see Knutson/Ardener (2001).

28 Wirz (1972), pp. 32 f.

29 Whitford/Anthony (1926), p. 8.

30 Wirz (1972); Quinn (2006). For a historical analysis of South Cameroonian societies see Laburthe-Tolra (1981); Guyer (1984); Alexandre/Binet (1958); Vansina (1990).

31 Harms (1981), pp. 44 f.

32 For the concept of „wealth in people“ see Kopytoff/Miers (1977); Guyer (1993); Guyer (1995).

33 Wirz (1972), pp. 103 f.

marry dozens of women and to build up enormous households. Wives worked in food production and gave birth to offspring who also worked for the household in various forms or who could be pawned or given in marriage to form new trading connections and, therefore, to acquire more capital.<sup>34</sup>

This process of accumulation accelerated in the early 1880s. On the one hand, the “culturally exalted masculinity” of rich traders who controlled large numbers of wives “became a powerful model for male aspirations”.<sup>35</sup> It undergirded the forms of accumulation practices of economic intermediaries that could be observed during the rubber boom. On the other hand, accumulation amplified inequality and exploitation – between men and women, but also between different social strata of men. In the 1880s, many men from poorer backgrounds became unable to marry because they had no connections to the ivory trade and hardly any access to European goods. Instead, they had to stay in the households of their fathers, uncles, or older brothers, or joined the traders’ households as clients and were allowed to live with one of their patron’s wives.<sup>36</sup> In a society where only a married man had any social standing,<sup>37</sup> this created massive tensions. Just before the advent of German rule in southern Cameroon, the region’s societies were a powder keg ready to explode.<sup>38</sup>

In the early 1890s, this social order came under stress. First, German colonial rulers assumed sovereign power. Second, the rubber trade allowed men hitherto excluded from the Atlantic export economy and stuck in the large households to earn European goods themselves.<sup>39</sup> Thousands grasped the opportunity offered by the demand for rubber and went into the forests, tapped trees and vines, sold their rubber to European companies, worked as wage laborers in trading caravans, earned European goods, married, and, therefore, assumed more individual autonomy.<sup>40</sup> What happened in southern Cameroon after 1892 was comparable to a gold rush: an often violent, feverish event, in which many people tried to get rich quickly. The social upheaval which followed on the heels of the rubber trade was not stabilized by the new colonial state. It rather contributed to the ensuing chaos: Because it lacked the manpower to establish control, it concentrated on violent policing. When the ivory traders tried to defend their social position and stopped European companies from buying rubber, the latter called the colonial army. Many traders were defeated militarily, and their position deteriorated even more.<sup>41</sup>

In colonial southern Cameroon there were, thus, on the one hand huge parts of the local population who wanted to sell rubber. On the other hand, there were European companies who wanted to buy rubber. However, as a German trader revealed: “Whites

34 See Walker-Said (2018), p. 5; Wirz (1972), pp. 15 f.; Laburthe-Tolra (1981), pp. 270–296; Guyer (1984), p. 16.

35 Brown (2003), p. 13.

36 Laburthe-Tolra (1981), p. 244; Quinn (2006), pp. 11, 22; Geschiere (1995).

37 Argenti (2008); Warnier (1996); Bayart (1985), p. 15; Guyer (1984); Alexandre/Binet (1958), p. 57; Laburthe-Tolra (1981), pp. 378–380.

38 Oestermann (2023), pp. 73 f.

39 Wirz (1972), pp. 107, 144; Geschiere (2007), p. 51.

40 Oestermann (2023).

41 See Hoffmann (2007); Kaeselitz (1968); Akamba (1979).



only buy very little rubber.”<sup>42</sup> The actual deals were mainly made by African economic intermediaries. Firms never had enough Europeans on the ground to buy the massive amounts of rubber in the vast trading networks in the rainforest. Europeans were expensive because they had to be paid, housed, fed, and transported from and to Europe, and many of them died from malaria and other diseases. On a cultural level, they often had difficulties learning African languages, or finding their way amongst the complex political relationships on the spot.<sup>43</sup> African economic intermediaries were considered a good alternative. The European managers of trading companies like C. Woermann, Jantzen & Thormählen, Randad & Stein and A. & L. Lubcke had learned their trade in Gabon. There, Africans from coastal areas had worked as intermediaries in business for decades.<sup>44</sup> European managers knew that African partners and employees with their skills, knowledge, and connections were an indispensable asset. Thus, European companies in southern Cameroon relied on African economic intermediaries for the lion's share of their trade.

### 3. Intermediary Positions in the Rubber Trade

The rubber trade in colonial Cameroon was complex. Several business models (from small European trading businesses to larger corporations with interests in several colonies to well financed concessionary companies) and techniques of trade (from trading factories to trading caravans, credit arrangements called “trust”, or forms of predatory lending like “trade back”) coexisted. Also, the importance of these models and techniques changed over time as well as did the very practices of the trade.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the rubber industry offered various intermediary positions for Africans, and these positions, the requirements, the expectations, and possibilities that came with them, also changed over time.

Independent African traders assumed important intermediary positions from the very beginning of the rubber trade. Some of them surely were part of the old ivory trading elite.<sup>46</sup> However, the demand for rubber and the European companies' need for local knowledge and connections offered space for newcomers. In fact, the use of credit within a system called “trust” was a strategy deliberately used to increase the number of traders willing to do business with them.<sup>47</sup> That at least some of these new independent traders should be distinguished from the pre-colonial ones becomes clear if we look at the example of a man called Elesä. At the turn of the century, he was considered one of

42 Fröhlich (1910). All translations from German are mine.

43 Schkopp (1903).

44 Oestermann (2023), pp. 50–55, 95 f.; Chamberlin (1977). The same was the case in other regions. See e.g. Coker (1976).

45 Oestermann (2023).

46 See e.g. Sabi (1910), p. 8.

47 Oestermann (2023), pp. 89–94. On trust see Njoku (1980); Lovejoy/Richardson (1999); Newbury (1972).



the “most important and influential traders between the Sanaga and the Nyong rivers”.<sup>48</sup> He was born around 1860 in the coastal town of Malimba. Presumably in this trading hub, he came into contact with the company of C. Woermann for which he worked as a captain on one of the firm’s launches. In 1894, however, Elesä no longer was an employee but a “Big Man” – a rich trader with a high social status.<sup>49</sup> He received credit from European companies and bought rubber from his Bakoko, Ngumba, Beti and Bulu trading partners.<sup>50</sup> Elesä traded for several companies. While originally affiliated with Woermann, at least from 1897 to 1899, he worked for the competitors from A. & L. Lubcke and probably also for others.<sup>51</sup> In 1901 or 1902, he worked for the Handelsgesellschaft Südwest-Kamerun.<sup>52</sup>

For many reasons, Elesä was very valuable for the firms. Unlike many European employees, he spoke local languages, knew the local trading customs, and possessed local networks which allowed him to travel far without being harmed.<sup>53</sup> Another important asset was that he also enjoyed yet another intermediary position as an agent of the colonial government. In 1894, he acted as an interpreter for the German administration and had already been given “a certain degree of judicial power”, probably in the littoral region, where he “worked very usefully”.<sup>54</sup> Later, Gouverneur von Puttkamer made Elesä the paramount chief of the Bakoko, further in the interior.<sup>55</sup> Elesä enjoyed good relationships with Europeans whom he entertained in his house, serving wine and beer (“Marienthaler dunkel, nicely chilled”).<sup>56</sup> Given the excesses which Elesä was accused of, which will be dealt with later in this article, it seems clear that Elesä did not separate his roles as trader and government agent but used the latter to make business – and this was also good for his European financiers.

These European companies, however, did not only rely on independent coastal *big men* like Elesä. They also employed Africans as rubber traders. As the rubber trade took the form of a trading frontier which constantly moved farther into the interior,<sup>57</sup> the companies’ business was characterized by spatial expansion into the hinterland. This expansion took the form of establishing trading factories at strategic points with dependent sub-factories on the rubber frontier, or of mobile trading caravans sent out from the coast or from the factories to the villages where rubber was produced.<sup>58</sup> Factories on strategic points, which were important for the organization of the rubber trade, were managed by Europeans. Trading factories on the rubber producing frontier, however,

48 Schkopp (1906), pp. 99 f.

49 SLUB Mscr. Dresd. app. 3045 Knochenhauer, Bruno. Vol. 3: 11th January 1894.

50 Schkopp (1906), p. 100 f.

51 BArch R 1001/3421 Liste der im Schutzgebiet Kamerun thätigen Handels- und Erwerbsgesellschaften 1897/98/99, pp. 4, 12, 18; Schkopp (1906), pp. 100 f.

52 Schkopp (1906), p. 101.

53 Schkopp (1906), pp. 100 f.

54 SLUB Mscr. Dresd. app. 3045 Knochenhauer, Bruno. Vol. 3: 11th January 1894.

55 Deutsches Reich (1906), vol. 3, p. 2150.

56 SLUB Mscr. Dresd. app. 3045 Knochenhauer, Bruno. Vol. 3: 11th January 1894; Schkopp (1906), pp. 102 f.

57 Oestermann (2023), p. 150.

58 For the organization of trading networks see Oestermann (2023), p. 94–102. See also Wirz (1972), pp. 115 f.

were manned by European as well as African employees. The same holds true for the caravans: They were led by Europeans or Africans. Sub-factories, often not more than a small hut, were only ran by Africans.<sup>59</sup>

A prominent example of an African factory manager is Martin Paul Zampa, who is mostly known for his career as a colonial soldier and resistance fighter.<sup>60</sup> Less known is that he worked as a rubber trader for the company of Randad & Stein for almost fifteen years – much longer than his military career.<sup>61</sup> Zampa began as a teenage servant for the German explorer Curt von Morgen in the 1880s, who brought him to Germany. There, he received a basic German education and military training. After his return to Cameroon in 1894, he became a noncommissioned officer in the *Schutztruppe*. After playing a leading role in the conquest of Cameroon, he retired from the military in 1899 to “take employment with the company of Randad & Stein as a black merchant”.<sup>62</sup> The company entrusted him with the establishment of a factory in a rather dangerous frontier zone. In May 1899, Zampa established a factory in Lembe, the village of the Yesum big man Semikoa. From there, he sent out seven African traders to establish sub-factories which depended on him. Every month his caravans transported c. 200 “kettles” of rubber to his company’s depot factory in Jaunde.<sup>63</sup>

African employees like Zampa not only bought rubber and managed factories but also performed other important intermediary tasks. One task was gathering commercially valuable information: African employees were commissioned to find places where a good business was possible for the companies, and to contact local trading partners. In the villages, they communicated what companies wanted to buy and what they intended to pay for it. In return, they told their employers about the goods which were in demand in a certain area. Another task was political or strategic communication with the local population on behalf of the firms. For example, when tensions between Semikoa and the German government arose in 1901, Zampa received a telling letter from his European superior:

In the interest of our firm Randad & Stein, I urgently beg you, dear Zampa, to do everything to make sure that Semikore [sic!] *does not cut a caper* and accompany you to Tabenne and speak with the captain. [...] Explain everything properly to Semikore; he does not have to be afraid; all he has to do is to always do what the government wants [...]. You are the only man, Zampa, who is in the position to tell him that.<sup>64</sup>

59 Oestermann (2023), pp. 97–102.

60 In the literature, his name is mostly spelled “Samba”. This article follows the spelling he himself used in his letters.

61 For the following biographical information see these often problematic accounts: Mbono Samba Azan (1976), p. 72; Laburthe-Tolra (1978); Michels/Zeller (2008); Rich (2012). His work as a trader is mentioned but not explored.

62 BArch N 227/22 Zampa to Morgen, 06.01.1899, p. 6.

63 BArch N 227/22 Zampa to Morgen, 26.03.1900, p. 9.

64 BArch R 1001/3349 Schomerus to Zampa, 19.02.1901, pp. 5 f.

Surely, Randad & Stein did not care about the physical safety of an African chief but feared that its profitable business in the area would collapse in the case of a war.

Unlike Zampa, who was born on the territory which later became Cameroon, many, at times even most African white-collar workers in the rubber trade were foreigners. They were called “outsiders” in contrast to the local “countrymen.”<sup>65</sup> Unlike independent traders, company employees who managed factories needed at least a minimum of Western education for bookkeeping. In the early colonial period, this group was very small in Cameroon. Missionary-trained Duala, who were the biggest group of Western educated Africans in the colony, were either absorbed locally in the Cameroon Estuary by the companies active in the palm products business, or deliberately excluded from jobs in the rubber trade in the South. Europeans claimed that Duala were not reliable enough.<sup>66</sup> A reason for this might have been that company managers feared an expansion of the independent Duala trade to the South. Most white-collar employees, therefore, were missionary-trained people from the West Coast of Africa. Their societies had been in contact to Europeans for decades or even centuries. Many, like Mullen, came from the Gold Coast. Others came from Gabon where the rubber companies were able to use their old or ongoing connections to the Mpongwe in the Gabon rubber trade.<sup>67</sup> However, wherever they came from, it was their Western education which opened the possibility for them to, like Mullen, migrate and claim an intermediary position in the profitable rubber trade.<sup>68</sup>

Another intermediary position in trade developed after 1902 with the massive expansion of the rubber industry by rising prices and the “Africanization” of trade by the introduction of a trading technique called “trade back.”<sup>69</sup> To reach more African rubber producers along the tiniest rainforest paths while saving the heavy costs of the established techniques of caravans and factories run by African or European employees, the companies outsourced large parts of the trade to African subcontractors, called tradebacks. An example of a tradeback was Peter Mungeli. Like many tradebacks, Mungeli already had a background as a colonial intermediary.<sup>70</sup> He had been brought to Limburg, Germany, by Pallottine missionaries for education in 1893 when he was c. ten years old. After he came back to Cameroon, he worked as a teacher in missionary schools. However, after marrying a second wife, he dropped out of missionary service.<sup>71</sup> “Peter Mungeli is a clerk somewhere in Kribi”, wrote another missionary student in 1903.<sup>72</sup> In 1904 at the latest, Mungeli worked as a tradeback for the British firm John Holt & Co.<sup>73</sup> Mungeli was one of many. In 1906, some firms sent out several hundreds of these subcontractors.<sup>74</sup> In

65 NN (1914), p. 481.

66 Reinhard (1901), p. 7.

67 Oestermann (2023), p. 104.

68 For the nexus of education, migration, and social advancement in early colonialism see Rich (2007).

69 Oestermann (2023), pp. 393–444.

70 Oestermann (2023), p. 409.

71 Aitken/Rosenhaft (2013), pp. 52 f.; Aitken (2015), pp. 39, 49; Otto (1897).

72 Provinzarchiv der Pallottiner A.11/313 Toko to Kugelmann, 22.09.1903.

73 BArch R 175-I/966 Rudno: Protocol, 10.03.1906, p. 52.

74 Liverpool Records Office (LRO) 380 HOL I/9/1 Kribi, 05.03.1906 Tradebacks.

1911, thousands of tradebacks worked in the rubber district of Delele alone.<sup>75</sup> It is very likely that African subcontractors were the largest group of all economic intermediaries in the rubber trade of Cameroon.

Tradebacks were no employees of the rubber companies. At least in theory, they worked their own business. They were connected to the firms because they received European trade goods on credit with which they had to buy and deliver an agreed upon amount of rubber. Tradebacks recruited the labor necessary for their business, bought rubber, and transported it to European factories. By outsourcing these tasks to African subcontractors, the firms were able to draw on African entrepreneurial initiative and on African networks which opened new alleys to trade and labor recruitment, not open to employees. Also, it allowed the firms to expand their trade into regions where their own staff would not be able to make profitable business as returns were too marginal to sustain their complex logistical networks.<sup>76</sup> Thus, working with subcontractors cut the costs of business and produced a lot of rubber.

#### 4. Profit

Working as an economic intermediary was very profitable for those who managed to move into this position. While it could also be very lucrative to produce rubber and sell it to the companies,<sup>77</sup> the traders' profits were much higher. Traders who were directly employed in white-collar-jobs by the companies earned a salary. The amount they received could vary considerably. Most Africans received between 15 and 100 Marks per month.<sup>78</sup> Some made considerably more. One of the top African earners was Zampa. When he signed contract with Randad & Stein in 1899, his starting salary was 175 Marks per month.<sup>79</sup> Europeans who had been sent out to Cameroon for the first time to work for a rubber company just earned 100 Mark a month in their first year.<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, the colonial administration noted that their indispensable non-commissioned officer had gone to the company "for high pay".<sup>81</sup> Very likely, the company was paying Zampa for his social standing and his local knowledge which promised high profits. Zampa was not the only African who earned more than his European colleagues: As an anonymous author complained in 1905, firms like Randad & Stein paid their experienced African staff even two or three times more than newly arrived Europeans. This had considerable fallout for colonial hierarchies based on race.<sup>82</sup>

75 BArch R 1001/4295 Gleim to Reichskolonialamt, 16.05.1911, p. 123.

76 Wirz (1972), p. 117.

77 Oestermann (2023), *passim*.

78 Staatliche Museen Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ethnologisches Museum (SMB-PK, EM): N Langheld, copy book without no., Langheld to Ungebauer, 18.12.1912; BArch R 1001/3551 Reinhard to Eltester, 28.12.1926, p. 79; Pagel (1914), p. 351.

79 BArch N 227/22 Zampa to Morgen, 06.01.1899, p. 6.

80 Zöller (1885), p. 116; Rackow (1911), p. 27.

81 BArch R 1001/4359 Note, 1901, p. 94.

82 NN (1905), p. 354.

Like European employees, Africans could significantly increase their salary with commissions on the rubber they bought.<sup>83</sup> When Zampa renewed his contract in 1905, he was able to make 400 Mark per month through wages and commissions.<sup>84</sup> This was an enormous amount of money. For comparison: In 1895, the average wage earner in industry, trade, and transport in Germany would earn 665 Marks – per year!<sup>85</sup> For some, commissions alone were lucrative enough to work as traders for the companies. In 1909, some African employees of John Holt & Co. got 30 Pfennigs per kilogram of rubber as their only pay.<sup>86</sup> Apparently, the traders did not care too much about the uncertainty connected with such an arrangement but counted on high amounts of rubber which they would bring in.

As subcontractors, tradebacks did not earn wages or commissions. Their profit depended on their own skill and success in trade. Like already described above, they received a certain amount of European goods on credit from the companies and had to deliver an agreed upon amount of rubber in exchange. For example, a tradeback would receive European goods worth 600 Marks on credit and promise to bring 250 kilograms of rubber. Tradebacks would give a part of their goods as credit to trading partners and rubber producers. The rest, they would keep for themselves. Thus, a tradeback who was able to use only goods worth 400 Marks instead of 600 Marks for 250 Kilograms of rubber, would make a profit of goods worth 200 Marks.<sup>87</sup> To increase their profits, tradebacks tried to buy rubber as cheap as possible. Authorities estimated that subcontractors usually kept one third of the advanced goods for themselves.<sup>88</sup> The amounts of goods given out on credit varied considerably. They could be very high for an established and well-known subcontractor. For example, in 1906 Mungeli received goods worth 6,000 Marks on credit.<sup>89</sup> Profit margins were so tempting that even ordinary African company employees who were supposed to use all their goods to buy rubber, illegally gave out their goods as credit and kept a part for themselves.<sup>90</sup> At the height of the rubber boom, African subcontractors did “not earn under 1,500 Marks per year; and many earn an income of 3,000 Marks and more.”<sup>91</sup> Given the high earning opportunities, it becomes clearer why Mullen called Cameroon “little less than an earthly paradise”. Unlike the popular image of the German colony as a place of violence and coercion, among educated, ambitious West Africans the name Cameroon had a different ring. Not only Gold Coasters like Mullen went there to make a fortune in the rubber trade. As a French official explained, also many men from neighboring Gabon found “employment in Came-

83 Oestermann (2023), pp. 438–440.

84 BArch N 227/22 Zampa to Morgen, 25.04.1905, p. 18.

85 BPB (2012).

86 LRO 380 HOL 1/9/1 Dengdeng, 08.01.1909.

87 BArch R 1001/4291 Excerpts from protocols from the interrogations about the Njem-Makka-uprising, undated, p. 121.

88 BArch R 175-I/67 Scheunemann: Annual report 1905/06, 31.03.1906, pp. 119 f.

89 BArch R 175-I/966 Rudno: Protocol, 10.03.1906, p. 55.

90 Prange (1912), p. 107.

91 Zimmermann (1913), p. 4.

room more lucrative than in their own proper country”.<sup>92</sup> For them, German Cameroon with its feverish and brutal rubber boom was a colony of opportunity.

Many economic intermediaries even further increased their profits and earning opportunities by using deception, blackmail, coercion, and violence. They created “unofficial corridors” of profit-making that were directly related to their position between the colonizers and the colonized.<sup>93</sup> The methods varied widely. Some extraverted the power of the colonial state for their own ends.<sup>94</sup> They created opportunities for profit by using their connection to Europeans and the terroristic colonial state to wield powers which they normally did not have. Zampa, for example, used his prestige as a former military which surely impressed the local population. It might have worked just like it did for Namalui Schwamme who had worked as an interpreter for the government. After he dropped out of government service, he worked as a labor recruiter for the rubber company Bremer Westafrika-Gesellschaft – and continued to display the attributes of colonial power: golden buttons and a horse.<sup>95</sup> Many traders, especially tradebacks, threatened their trading partners with calling the *Schutztruppe* if they did not repay their debts. They surely knew that threats like this were unsubstantiated. But they counted on the bad experiences of their trading partners with this colonial army.<sup>96</sup> Elesa did not resort to make-believe colonial power, but used his real administrative functions for self-enrichment. When the government outlawed the use of cap guns in the Sanaga area, Elesa was mandated to collect unlicensed guns in his area. However, instead of executing orders, he sold gun licenses – the exact opposite of what he was expected to do – and allegedly kept the best items for himself.<sup>97</sup>

Another way of increasing profits was fraud. These practices could be directed against Africans as well as against Europeans. According to the trader Eberhard von Schkopp, Elesa was notorious for deceiving his European trading partners. He allegedly bilked the company of A. & L. Lubcke of thousands of Marks. Von Schkopp also became one of Elesa’s victims when the latter sold ivory he had bought with credit from von Schkopp’s firm to its British competitors.<sup>98</sup>

On other occasions, economic intermediaries opted for violence and coercion to increase their profits. Elesa was himself accused of murder and kidnapping.<sup>99</sup> Zampa established a close relationship to his host, chief Semikoa, to violently carve out a profitable niche in the area where he ran his factory. He managed to convince Semikoa to exclude all competing traders from his land. As Zampa told a government physician, other African traders were brutally killed by Semikoa’s men.<sup>100</sup> Thereby, Semikoa and

92 Quoted in Rich (2007), p. 502.

93 Osborn (2003), p. 30.

94 Michels (2004), *passim*.

95 BArch R 175-I/966 Jacob to government, 21.12.1905, p. 38.

96 BArch R 1001/8115 Scheunemann to government, 10.04.1905, p. 256.

97 Deutsches Reich (1906), vol. 3, p. 2150; Schkopp (1906), p. 103.

98 Schkopp (1906), pp. 100–102.

99 Schkopp (1906), p. 104.

100 Hoesemann (1902), p. 103.



Zampa established “a kind of violent trading monopoly of the company of Randad & Stein”, as governor Jesko von Puttkamer wrote.<sup>101</sup>

While many economic intermediaries used violence and deception from time to time, trade back was inseparably linked with abusive practices. Because the profit of tradebacks depended on cutting the number of European goods used for buying and transporting rubber to the lowest amount possible, this trading technique was prone to fraud, trickery, and violence. Mungeli is a very good example. In 1905, he hired 60 porters to transport rubber from the interior to the coast. Already on their way, Mungeli told his porters that there actually was no rubber – it still had to be bought in the rainforest. By promising them huge wages, Mungeli tricked his men to accompany him. However, instead of a few weeks, they stayed in the interior for 14 months. During their stay, his porters were neither paid nor fed but had to peddle and steal for food. Back at the coast, Mungeli not only paid them much less than agreed upon. He also told them that part of the amount they had received was actually an advance – and they were obliged to go with him into the interior, again.<sup>102</sup> Other tradebacks used blackmail and hostage-taking to beat down prices and increase their profits.<sup>103</sup> Around 1905, trade back caused violence and even murder. While the colonial government lamented the growing disorder, it lacked the means to mitigate the tide of chaos unleashed by the rubber trade and the possibilities of enrichment which it offered.<sup>104</sup>

Many Africans in the colony who did not work as economic intermediaries or who became their victims despised (and envied) the rapacious form of accumulation practices by this group. The German trader von Schkopp reported in his memoirs that Elesa was hated by the population among which he lived and worked. “Telling for the appreciation for this gentleman amongst his black brothers is that his fellow tribesmen, the Malimba people whom I also do not consider to be prigs, did not longer put up with him [...]. The Bakoko hated him like sin itself.”<sup>105</sup> “From everywhere”, he wrote, “people came to me and complained that Elesa mistreated them.”<sup>106</sup> His neighbors attributed his wealth and violent accumulation to witchcraft. As the cook of missionary Robert H. Nassau described, Elesa was said to own a small bundle of a powerful charm, called *Ekongi*, which protected him and his riches.<sup>107</sup> Von Schkopp heard from his interlocutors that they feared to report Elesa’s violent abuses to the government because he was said to be “skilled in operating with deadly poisons.”<sup>108</sup> Also, von Schkopp heard that Elesa “had poisoned several of his own sons in cold blood.”<sup>109</sup> These stories and the charm hint

101 BArch R 1001/3348 Puttkamer to Kolonial-Abteilung, 05.03.1901, p. 169. See also Hoffmann (2007), vol. 1, p. 113.

102 BArch R 175-I/966 Rudno: Protocol, 10.03.1906, pp. 52–54.

103 BArch R 1001/3535 Persson to Kolonial-Abteilung, 29.04.1905, pp. 64–68; BArch R 1001/4291 Interrogation Makosso, 02.02.1906, p. 127.

104 Oestermann (2023), pp. 444–486.

105 Schkopp (1906), p. 101.

106 Schkopp (1906), p. 100.

107 Nassau (1904), pp. 165–168.

108 Schkopp (1906), p. 101.

109 Schkopp (1906), p. 104.



to local ideas of witchcraft called *ekon/ekom/ekongi*, connected to illicit accumulation in trade: According to missionaries, “a trader who wants to [...] enrich himself, names an unpopular relative or acquaintance to a sorcerer, that is a preparer of poisons.” While the trader leaves for the “bush” to make business, the person now gets poisoned. “According to this superstition, as soon as his soul leaves his body, this person has to help his relative in the bush to make a profitable business.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, the accusation of Elesá to be using charms and poisons, throws light on how local people thought about his ascent to riches: It was not legitimate.

### 5. Investment

Whether seen as legitimate or not, African economic intermediaries used their profits in various ways. One important way to spend earnings was conspicuous consumption. For instance, the traders showed that they could afford European luxuries which were considered very prestigious. Illustrative is the example of Zampa. In 1904, he wrote to his mentor von Morgen, that he sported a gramophone, two horses, four servants, and a washerman. “My wife wears beautiful long dresses and shoes like the fancy ladies in Germany and always promenades herself proudly.”<sup>111</sup> Also the traders themselves often wore excellent and expensive clothes to show off their wealth. For example, onboard the steamship to the trading posts at the Cameroon coast, Hans Ossmann observed a number of “Black Gentlemen”, who worked for the rubber companies: “their collars were so high that they hardly could move their heads, and their fingers excessively covered with so-called Accra-rings”.<sup>112</sup> Some African traders bought luxuries in European factories. Those who searched for special exclusiveness first ordered a catalogue and then the desired commodities directly from Germany. According to a German missionary, this was where Zampa got his luxury articles: “For his wife, he ordered dresses in the leading stores. Once, he is said to have ordered a dress for her that was as beautiful and expensive as the one worn by the Empress herself.”<sup>113</sup> By displaying these European forms of wealth, traders like Zampa signaled their social position well above the average African in the colony. Their wealth made the intermediaries respected, feared, and envied individuals wielding considerable power.

However, profits were not only consumed but also invested. Many economic intermediaries invested in precolonial forms of wealth – and, thereby, followed models of “culturally exalted masculinity” characteristic for southern Cameroon: They acquired rights over people, especially through marriage. Not without reason, Mullen mentioned the access to many “young wives” as an incentive for people to work as traders in Came-

110 König (1901), p. 42. See also Schilitz (1901), p. 123. For an anthropological account of these forms of witchcraft and its connection to illicit accumulation see Geschiere (1997); Geschiere (2001).

111 BArch N 227/22 Zampa to von Morgen, 29.10.1904, p. 17.

112 Osman (1911), p. 59.

113 Hennemann (1915), pp. 131 f.

room.<sup>114</sup> The rubber boom contributed to rising costs for bridewealth. In 1910, in Molundu in the extreme Southeast of the colony, a suitor had to pay goods worth 500 to 3,000 Marks to the father of the girl he wanted to marry.<sup>115</sup> In the Dume region, at the heart of rubber production in that time, bridewealth surely was even dearer as a lot of goods flowed in through the rubber trade. However, just like the precolonial ivory traders, African economic intermediaries were in a very good position to pay expensive bridewealth and to build large households. As the journalist Emil Zimmermann reported from the Dume region c. 1910: A successful factory manager, “dressed in an immaculate suit with white shirt, white collar, and fine calfskin-boots” had thought it “necessary to get three young black beauties for himself, who certainly cost him a lot of money.”<sup>116</sup>

Marriage and investment in large households did not only follow cultural forms of masculinity but had also other reasons: Marriages created networks of alliances between traders and the local populations. Also, women and children could be used as laborers. Marriage was an important method of mobilizing labor, especially in a society where access to labor was difficult and highly competitive.<sup>117</sup> This is demonstrated by the example of Elesa. Already in 1904, he was said to be the owner of a cocoa-plantation.<sup>118</sup> Apparently, this was a long-term investment for him because he was still mentioned as a trader and farmer in the Kribi district in 1913.<sup>119</sup> As a German gardener observed, the workers of Elesa’s plantation were mostly women – very likely his wives.<sup>120</sup>

Elesa was not the only African economic intermediary who invested his profits in cash crop agriculture. The transformation of trading profits into land ownership and the establishment of plantations run by extended families was a pattern. This is especially true for the period after the collapse of the rubber trade in 1913 and the First World War. Former economic intermediaries of the rubber trade played a certain role in the postwar cash crop boom. The same is known from the Gold Coast where rubber profits were invested in cocoa-growing.<sup>121</sup> In 1929, a German who had returned to southern Cameroon reported: “The old trader Akin and also Haefert have a huge cocoa plantation in Elin.”<sup>122</sup> Foreign traders who had worked for rubber companies and had stayed in Southern Cameroon also invested in cocoa. William Heyford from the Gold Coast, who like Mullen had spent his life as a rubber trader, is reported to have had three cocoa plantations.<sup>123</sup> This way, the fortunes made in the gold rush of the rubber boom were transferred into the new era of cash crop production under the French mandate.

114 Mullen (2008), p. 24.

115 Museum am Rothenbaum. Kulturen und Künste der Welt SCH 1.10, Frage 970.

116 Zimmermann (1913), p. 4.

117 Oestermann (2023).

118 Winkler (1906), p. 573.

119 NN (1913), p. 318.

120 Winkler (1906), p. 573.

121 Dumett (1971); Arhin (1980).

122 NN (1929), p. 14.

123 O’Brien (1938), p. 237.

## 6. Conclusion

Under German colonial rule, Cameroon developed into a colony of opportunity. It was not because of goodwill German policy. Rather, opportunities emerged because of the chaos which developed in the wake of colonial conquest and the rubber boom. An important group of beneficiaries of the chaos and its opportunities were African economic intermediaries. Just like other colonial sectors, European trading companies depended on Africans to keep their business running. As traders, managers of factories, or subcontractors, African economic intermediaries were the ones who bought most of the rubber. In exchange, their engagement in trade offered them the possibility for profits. African employees earned high wages and even higher commissions. Subcontractors were given the opportunity to earn high margins. And as many Europeans, many Africans did not care about other people, their wellbeing, their lives. Some of these intermediaries used their position between colonizers and colonized to increase their profits even more: They deceived their European as well as African trading partners, they illegally assumed administrative powers, they blackmailed, threatened, kidnapped, and murdered. With incomes sometimes much higher than those of average German wage-earners, African economic intermediaries engaged in conspicuous consumption, invested in demographic expansion, bought property, and invested in cash crop production.

The history of African economic intermediaries again shows the limits of European power and control under colonial rule. Their dependence on Africans on the spot opened opportunities for those who were skilled, sly, or reckless enough. Africans influenced the development of colonial capitalism beyond the intentions of the colonizers – and oftentimes acted directly against them while exploiting the opportunities offered by colonial rule and the following destruction of local political, social, and economic structures.

This article focused on African traders as economic intermediaries. However, they were not the only ones one could count among those who grasped the opportunities of the chaotic colonial situation: Chiefs, headmen, and slave dealers used the new labor market and sold or rented out their dependents as laborers.<sup>124</sup> Porters used their journey to the coast to buy goods and sold them in the interior for profit.<sup>125</sup> Tricksters used the unending demand for caravan labor to hire themselves and their men out for carrying European goods – and disappeared with them never to be seen again.<sup>126</sup> Family heads hired out their wives and daughters as prostitutes.<sup>127</sup> Boys sold their sisters to passers-by.<sup>128</sup> If we look at these many economic intermediaries, these traders, profiteers, soldiers of fortune, and outright gangsters, we can gain a new picture of the Cameroonian economy: one, in which violence and coercion still played an important role, but also

<sup>124</sup> Oestermann (2023), *passim*.

<sup>125</sup> Oestermann (2023), pp. 230–233.

<sup>126</sup> Prange (1912), pp. 232–238.

<sup>127</sup> BArch R 1001/3416 Rohrbach: Kameruner Verhältnisse, Frankfurter Zeitung, 25.05.1913, p. 84.

<sup>128</sup> Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Ms. germ. oct. 1355 Sauer, Fritz (1919): *Meine Fahrt zum Äquator. Süd-Kameruner Erinnerungen*, p. 257.

one that is embedded into African history and African social institutions. One which shows the many forms of how Africans experienced and shaped colonial rule and colonial capitalism. One that takes African agency seriously.

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