

Review Article

Ancient African Trade Leads, for a Prospective African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

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Abstract: This paper examines the contributions of ancient African trade practices and perspectives for an effectual African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Trade was a very important economic activity in ancient Africa, freely practiced, within short and long-distances, dependent on the actors and items involved. It was essentially through the direct exchange of goods and services for others (barter system). As time went by, other mediums of exchange: cowrie shells, golds dust, beads and others were introduced. The desire to engage in it, instigated many African communities to develop one industrial technology or the other, like blacksmithing, iron bending, carving, weaving and others, producing what they sold or exchanged for other goods and or items. Trading in these, helped connect African societies, despite challenges (fear, insecurity and transportation constraints) faced. It can therefore be contended that practices such as diversification, lowered barriers and others, that characterised ancient African trade, could enhance the most cherished African integration, unity and prosperity that the African Union seeks. This may further help improve trade relations amongst states within the continent through the AfCFTA, especially by diversifying the production of goods and exterminating all tariff and non-tariff barriers in Africa. Encouraging diversification with “made in Africa” products, would attract more trade opportunities within and beyond the continent. In constructing the paper, primary and secondary data were used, interpreted qualitatively and presented logically.

Keywords: Ancient Africa, Trade leads, Prospective, AfCFTA.

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INTRODUCTION

African history is vast and diverse, shaped by a multitude of political, economic and socio-cultural actions, from the precolonial, to colonial and post colonial eras. Trade has been an essential pillar of human civilization, shaping societies and economies long before the dawn of contemporary markets. Ancient African trade networks served not only as channels for the exchange of goods and services, but also as conduits for cultural interaction, invention, and spread of ideas [1]. In fact, ancient African trade was characterized by a diverse

array of commodities, including gold, ivory, textiles, salt, spices and others [2], facilitated by established routes such as the trans-Saharan trade routes, East African Coast maritime exchanges and inland trade. These ancient trading practices led to the emergence of powerful kingdoms and trading states, from the Mali Empire with its fabulous wealth in gold to the Swahili city-states that thrived along the East African coast [3]. Such vivacious economic activities not only transformed local economies, but positioned Africa as a key player in both regional and global trade networks. Apart from the

¹ Alexander Moradi, “Commodity Trade and Development: Theory, History, Future”, Ewout Frankema et al. (eds), *The History of African Development: A Textbook for a New Generation of African Students and Teachers*, the African Economic History Network, the Netherlands, 2023, p.60.

² Natina Yaduma and Wasiq N. Khan, “Intra-Regional Trade and African Economic Integration”, Ewout

Frankema et al. (eds), *The History of African Development: A Textbook for a New Generation of African Students and Teachers*, the African Economic History Network, the Netherlands, 2023, p. 280.

³ Moradi, “Commodity Trade and Development: Theory, History, Future”, pp.59-60.

importance of networks, ancient trade was facilitated by the barter system and localised economies, cultural exchanges and integration, community centric trading, diversity of goods and services, negotiations and diplomacy, transportation and infrastructure development, education and training. This historical backdrop provides invaluable insights for a transformative journey toward achieving the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2018 to foster intra-African trade, enhancing economic integration, and promoting sustainable development [4]. As the continent faces the complexities of globalization, political instability, and economic disparities, understanding the evolution of regional integration, becomes essential for fostering effective governance and sustainable development.

Lessons from ancient trade dynamics are predominantly pertinent in the contemporary context of the AfCFTA, as Africa seeks to reduce its dependence on external markets and enhance self-sufficiency. Revisiting these historical trade practices can inform the modern integration of African economies. The existing contexts of ancient trade in terms of resource management, regional collaboration and negotiation strategies can offer guidance in circumnavigating the intricacies of modern-day trade relations. For a better perspective, this paper, begins by establishing the contextual setting of trade in Africa before the AfCFTA. It proceeds with the putting in place of the AfCFTA principally based on creating a single continental market for goods and services thereby enhancing Africa's integration. It also highlights the different ancient African Trade networks and practices, rounding off with its lessons for AfCFTA, which not only embrace the potential to spur economic growth and development, but also to reinforce a sense of African identity and shared destiny for the continent.

I. Contextual Background

African societies were highly economically, politically and socio-culturally interconnected during the precolonial period, characterised by well organised trading activities. Aside flourishing regional trade among kingdoms and communities, were important trade networks: Trans-Saharan Trade Route and East African Coast network in ancient Africa, practiced through

lowered borders. Trade had helped Africans prosper before colonisation. European nations, rivalled, partitioned and colonised the continent, for the economic exploitation of its resources [5]. They established extractive economic systems, that prioritised profit over development, disrupting local economic landscapes. Colonialism caused an increase in protectionist trade policies as European powers partitioned Africa without paying sufficient attention to social, economic, or geographic factors [6]. Controls by colonial authorities restructured economic life away from the natural trade relations that had existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. As a result, independence brought political instability, conflict and economic dependency on former colonial powers, hindering sustainable growth. Regional economic integration did thus emerge in the 1960s alongside other policies, as strategies to promote economic growth, enhance competitiveness, and facilitate the free movement of goods, services, and people. This gained significant attention, after the creation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 and the establishment of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as means to addressing challenges on African unity and cooperation, trade fragmentation, low intra-African trade, and dependence on external Markets, opting for a gradual rather than immediate integration through sub-regionalism [7]. This search for larger and sustainable subregional integration among independent African countries resulted in breakthrough sub regional co-operation arrangements in the late 1960s and 1980s through RECs [8].

The Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) was adopted in 1980 by the OAU, as a turning point in the history of regional integration in Africa, based on an economic strategy anchored on the idea of endogenous or self-centred development [9]. This policy framework by the OAU, was aimed to guide Africa's economic development for the period from 1980 to 2000. It emerged as a response to the economic challenges the continent faced, including the impact of colonialism, the dominance of Western economic models, and the global economic shocks of the 1970s, leading to highly inflated economies, fiscal and trade deficits and poor growth, with concerns about Africa's ability to accelerate globalisation. It was also during this period that the debt crisis emerged. Among the LPA's decisions was the

⁴ Oumnia Boutaleb, "Regional Integration: Can it Bring More Independence to Africa?" Policy Brief - N° 24/22, Policy Centre for the New South, April 2022,

⁵ G.N.n Sanderson, "The European Partitioning of Africa: Origins and Dynamics", R. Oliver and G.N. Sanderson (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Africa: Volume 6: From 1870-1905*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 103.

⁶ Fondo Sikod, 77 years, Economist, University of Yaounde II, Yaoundé, 13th October 2016.

⁷ Adehayo Adedeji, "History and Prospects for Regional Integration in Africa." CFR at The Third Meeting of the

African Development Forum Addis Ababa, 5 March 2002, Retrieved at <https://repository.uneca.org/bitstream/handle/10855/31368/b10796769.PDF?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 20th June 2025.

⁸ Naceur Bourenane, "Regional Integration in Africa: Situation and Prospects," in Development Centre Seminars, *Regional Integration in Africa*, OECD Publications, Paris, 2002, p. 18-19.

⁹ African Union Commission, 2019 African Regional Integration Report: Towards an Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa, Addis Ababa, 2019, p.6.

intention to establish an African Economic Community (AEC) in the foreseeable future, aimed towards strengthening existing regional economic communities and creating others to cover the continent as a whole. The primary goal was to create a unified African market, similar to the European Union, to boost trade, investment, and economic growth [10]. The LPA emphasized self-reliance, suggesting that African nations, reduce their dependence on external aid and focus on utilizing their own resources for development. It thus aimed to achieve food self-sufficiency, promote industrialization, and improve trade and economic cooperation among African nations. Its principle can be summed up as: counting on one's own strengths [11]. The LPA's efforts were slow to yield fruits giving rise to a complementary vision: the Abuja Treaty in May 1994.

Adopted in June 1991, the Abuja Treaty entered into force in May 1994, endowed with the vision of the Heads of State and Government, to realise Africa's integration through meaningful economic development. To enhance its effectiveness, the treaty was condensed into six main stages namely: creating and strengthening regional economic communities; eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers; creating the free trade area; a continental customs union; an African common market, and an African economic and monetary union [12]. This treaty considered RECs as pillars in the African integration process. It opted for consolidating integration at regional level with a view to then spreading all over the continent [13]. This led to establishing the African Economic Community (AEC) following a 34-year, six-step sequential approach and other giant strides, to the Constitutive Act of the African Union of July 2000, which officially came into force on May 2001 and launched in 2002, replacing the OAU [14]. The 2000s could be referred to as the years of consolidation efforts within the regional integration process, following the provisions of the Abuja Treaty with the establishment of the African Union. The Abuja Treaty is arguably the

most important agreement regarding economic, social and political collaboration, coordination and convergence in Africa.

II. Creation of AfCFTA and Expectations

During the 18th ordinary Session of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in January 2012, a decision to establish an African Continental Free Trade Area was reached. This was to act as an Action Plan for boosting intra-African trade as a key initiative whose implementation would promote socio-economic growth and development [15]. This idea emerged in response to Africa's fragmented markets and need to boost intra-African trade, which was relatively low, compared to other regions [16]. It was also a follow up of the creation of the AEC, introduced by the LPA and continued under the Abuja Treaty. In 2013, the AU adopted Agenda 2063, a strategic framework aimed at transforming Africa, kick-starting the implementation of this new form of integration on a continental scale, with the objective of achieving an annual growth rate of 7 percent as set by Agenda 2063 [17]. This Agenda undeniably required regional integration as a means of promoting inclusive growth for all countries, along with a structural transformation [18]. One of its key goals was to establish the AfCFTA as a means to enhance intra-African trade and boost her trading position in the global market by strengthening its common voice and policy space in global trade negotiations [19].

As a first step towards creating the AfCFTA, three African economic communities came together to form a Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) in 2015 [20]. This regional initiative was established, following the summit between the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the East African Community (EAC), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), with the aim of eventually achieving full regional integration for all African countries in this zone, which included southern and

¹⁰ Anita Kruger, "Regional Integration in Africa: Theories, Concepts, and Lessons for Successful Policy Creation and Implementation", Master of Commerce in Development Finance dissertation, The Development Finance Centre (DEFIC), Graduate School of Business and Finance, University of Cape Town, 2021, p.7.

¹¹ African Union Commission, "2019 African Regional Integration Report", p.6.

¹² Boutaleb, "Regional Integration: Can it Bring More Independence to Africa? pp.2-3.

¹³ African Union Commission 2019, 2019 African Regional Integration Report" p.7.

¹⁴ Adehayo Adedeji, "History and Prospects for Regional Integration in Africa".

¹⁵ African Union, *Boosting Intra-African Trade: Issues Affecting Intra-African Trade, Proposed Action Plan for boosting Intra-African Trade and Framework for fast tracking of a Continental Free Trade Area*, Addis Ababa,

Ethiopia, retrieved from https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploadeddocuments/ATPC/issues_affecting_intraafrican_trade_proposed_action_plan_for_biat_and_framework_for_the_fast_tracking_en.pdf, 8th January 2026.

¹⁶ African Union Commission, "2019 African Regional Integration Report".

¹⁷ African Union Commission, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* April 2015.

¹⁸ F. Ismail, "Working paper: Advancing the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) and Agenda 2063 in the Context of the Changing Architecture of the Global Trade", 2016.

¹⁹ Bama Etienne Cham, 45 Years, Coordinator of the AfCFTA-GTI for Cameroon, Douala Cameroon, 5th January 2026.

²⁰ Boutaleb, "Regional Integration: Can it Bring More Independence to Africa? p.6.

central Africa [21]. The African Union designed the free trade areas of regional communities following the Southern and Central communities' models. This was such that continental organization would first encourage regional integration among the various RECs in the same region through the establishment of free trade areas, such that when the AfCFTA finally got implemented, its application will be easier for all regions with already harmonized trade policies and increased trade. In the context of the TFTA, tariffs and rules of origin were first negotiated. In a second phase, the regional communities discussed cross-border investments, competition policies, and the supply of services. Although one of the primary objectives of the free trade area was to transform the continent into a more globally integrated and competitive space, it was contended that real effects would only be observed when the agreement actually goes into force [22].

AfCFTA, was established in 2018, with the view to creating the world's largest free trade area across 55 African Union member states, significantly boosting intra-African trade [23]. Its agreement entered into force on May 30, 2019, and trading commenced on January 1, 2021 [24]. Intra-African trade as at the year of its implementation accounted for about 15 percent of the total African trade volume [25]. In contrast, intracontinental trade accounted for 51 percent of exports in North America, 49 percent in Asia, 22 percent in Latin America, while among Western European countries this number reached 69 percent [26]. Although some Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa had achieved improvements in trade integration through tariff reductions, the African market remained fragmented. Non-tariff barriers (NTBs) such as uncoordinated bureaucratic procedures, long waiting times at the border or lengthy and difficult export requirements raise trade costs on the continent. With more and more countries joining the AfCFTA by ratifying the agreement (status at publication: 42 ratifications as of February 2022), cutting through these barriers and opening up borders and countries to trade opportunities is already making a difference on the ground [27]. It sought to eliminate trade barriers and

boost intra-African trade, fostering economic growth, industrialization, job creation and others [28]. The AfCFTA is expected to achieve an annual growth rate of 7 percent as set by Agenda 2063. The next section shall explore ancient trade networks and their implications.

III. Ancient African Trade Networks

Before colonialism, Africa was home to a variety of societies, each with its own governance structures, trade networks, and cultural practices. They carried out trade among themselves, because no society produced all it needed to survive and this internal trade was always conducted on a barter basis [29]. This was freely practiced, within short and long-distances, depending on the actors and items involved. Trade urged African communities to develop one industrial technology or the other, producing what they could sell or exchange for others, through well-established trading channels. This led to the emergence of regional trade, based on the exchange of ecologically specialized goods and not the production of similar goods [30]. The desire to engage in trade, instigated many African communities to develop industrial technology, like blacksmithing, iron bending, carving, weaving and others, producing what they could sell or exchange for other goods and or items. However, around the 1st half of the 19th century (1840-1850), Long Distance Trade developed. This section shall be based on some trade networks that existed in ancient Africa and how they evolved and influenced the region. These were the Trans-Saharan Trade Network, the East African Coast Network and the Inland Network.

A. The Trans-Saharan Trade Network

The Trans-Saharan trade network in ancient Africa, linked North Africa with sub-Saharan communities, fostering integration through commerce. With the gradual adoption of Islam in West Africa (between 750 and 1400 CE) [31], Islamic traders entered the region and began to trade for gold and slaves from West Africa. Interactions among various ethnic groups led to a rich history of cultural exchange, with shared languages, traditions, and intermarriages that enhanced

²¹ Ibid., pp.2-3.

²² Ibid., p.9.

²³ H. Fofack, "A competitive Africa: Economic Integration could make it a Global Partner," *Finance and Development*, December 2018, p. 49.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ GIZ, "Successes in Regional Economic Integration Stories from GIZ programmes across Africa" Retrieved from <https://www.giz.de/de/downloads/giz2022-en-successes-in-regional-economic-integration.pdf>, on 23 November 2025, p.15.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ J. Mulindwa, *Precolonial Trade in the Interior of East Africa*, retrieved from <https://asbatlibrary.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/4653f2e1-3c2d-49a1-915a-00409e559490-S2%20%20HISTORY%20%20PRE-%20colonial%20societies.pdf>, 16 August 2025.

³⁰ Emmanuel, Akyeampong, *History of African Trade*, African Export-Import Bank, Afreximbank, 2015, p.2. Retrieved from, <https://elibrary.acbfact.org/acbf/collect/acbf/index/assoc/HASH0100/039e055d/606b9c4a/9550.dir/History-of-African-Trade.pdf>, on 28 June 2025.

³¹ Shadreck Chirikure, "Documenting Precolonial Trade in Africa", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, Oxford University Press USA, 2016. Retrieved from <file:///C:/Users/USER/Downloads/acrefore-9780190277734-e-68.pdf>, on 26 June 2025

social cohesion [32]. The trade between Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa was purposely on the exchange of gold, salt ivory, tobacco, copper, spices, ebony, kola nuts, cloth, slaves, metal goods, beads and others. These goods were exchanged for North African ones such as horses, books, swords and chain mail [33]. Gold from southern Africa to northern Africa, traded for salt, brought much wealth to the Empire of Ghana. By taxing it and benefiting from it directly, Ghana became the first great African empire, followed by Mali and Songhai. Ghana was by the eighth century known as “the land of gold” in Baghdad [34]. Instructively, medieval Trans-Saharan trade reflected the complementarity of regional and international trade [35]. Gold mines provided great wealth to these empires, rooted in their control over gold and salt trade routes [36]. The wealth from gold mining enabled these empires to invest in infrastructure and military power, enhancing regional influence.³⁷ Al Umari, who visited Cairo twelve years after Mansa Musa’s intimated that he and his company gave out so much gold that they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall [38]. His extravagance brought Mali to the attention of the world and Mali would appear on the world map from the year 1339 [39].

With the use of camels, trade routes were formed between cities across the Sahara Desert. At first, gold trade dominated, but later trade in copper and salt became more important. These valuable goods were used for long-distance trade across the Sahara Desert. Despite the challenges (fear, insecurity and transportation constraints), trade helped connect African societies. Major trade centres concentrated in the Niger River Basin such as: Timbuktu, Gao, Koumbi Saleh and Djenné connected sub-Saharan regions to areas north of the Sahara Desert including the rich trading regions along North Africa’s Mediterranean Coast. Major commodities such as gold, kola nuts, and slaves among others, were exchanged for salt [40]. The foregoing trading and staging posts were where such trade took place. When the Portuguese arrived on the coast of Elmina on the Gold Coast in 1471, which they named El Mina (the mine) because of the visible presence of gold, they also encountered Dyula traders at the coast from the

Mali Empire, underscoring the extent of regional trading networks [41]. Between 1200 and 1550 Mali had well-established caravan routes that converged at Niani and other trading posts, under military protection by the empire. Along with the trade and exchange of material goods, went the dispersal of Mande (language of Malian Empire), technology and culture [42]. After examining the Trans-Saharan Trade network, the next section shall dwell on the East African Coast trade.

B. The East African Coast Trade

The precolonial East African trade network was characterized by both the extensive Indian Ocean and inland caravan networks that exchanged goods like gold, ivory, and slaves for textiles, spices, and ceramics. Key features included the development of intermediary tribes, the use of Swahili as a lingua franca and the evolution from barter to using mediums like cowrie shells and later, copper coins [43]. The basic or core vocabulary of Swahili is Bantu, with the Arab loan words clustered in very specific areas dealing with trade, maritime technology, religion, jurisprudence and other specialized subjects. The Indian Ocean became a single world and Swahili sailors were found in the Arab world and in Asia, just as Arabs and Asians frequented the Swahili Coast. This trade was vital for connecting the interior with the coast and international markets, enriching powerful coastal city-states like Kilwa and Mombasa. Excavations at Swahili towns such as Shanga identified glass beads, Islamic ceramics, and Chinese porcelain that were sourced through the Indian Ocean-based trade and exchange system [44]. Shifting into the interior, Great Zimbabwe yielded significant quantities of glass beads, fewer than a hundred fragments of imported ceramics, and bronze objects, gold objects, and tin ingots, suggesting that it participated in local and regional trade. An Arabic coin and imported ceramics like those used at Kilwa in the 14th and 15th centuries were also recovered from Great Zimbabwe confirming direct or indirect connections between these places. Kilwa was one of the richest city-states on the Swahili or East African coast in the two centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese [45].

³² S. Jeppie and S. B. Diagne, *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2008).

³³ Alexander Moradi, *Commodity Trade and Development: Theory, History, Future*, p.6.

³⁴ Emmanuel, Akyeampong, *History of African Trade*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Akyeampong, *History of African Trade*, p.6.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Emmanuel, Akyeampong, *History of African Trade*.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ S. Jeppie and S. B. Diagne, *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2008.

⁴¹ Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press,

1993.

⁴² Shadreck Chirikure, “Documenting Precolonial Trade in Africa”, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History, Oxford University Press USA, 2016. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/USER/Downloads/acrefore-9780190277734-e-68.pdf, on 26 June 2025

⁴³ Alexander Moradi, “Commodity Trade and Development” p.60.

⁴⁴ Shadreck Chirikure, “Documenting Precolonial Trade in Africa”, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History, Oxford University Press USA, 2016. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/USER/Downloads/acrefore-9780190277734-e-68.pdf, on 26 June 2025, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel, Akyeampong, *History of African Trade*, African Export-Import Bank, Afreximbank, 2015, p.8.

With the establishment of Islam on the East African coast, various writers commented on daily activities on the coast and hinted on the trade between the coast and the southern African interior. Writers such as Al Masudi (c. 856–956 CE) commented on the trade between East Africa and the hinterland, believed to be the Zimbabwe Plateau [46]. According to Masudi, the hinterland supplied iron, gold, ivory, and possibly slaves in exchange for glass beads, cowries, and cloth. In this area, the Portuguese overtook the trade from the late 15th century onward and established trading stations such as Dambarare in the interior by the beginning of the 16th century [47]. They left many documentary sources that within limitations have been used for understanding trade relations with the Mutapa state (c. 1400–1900 CE) and between the Mutapa and the Portuguese.⁴⁸ In the Kingdom of Kongo (c. 1390–1914) in modern-day Angola, the Portuguese also left various reports that are an important source of information. Across the entire African continent, documentary sources had increased in frequency by the eve of European colonization, largely due to the activities of missionaries, travelers and traders and military personnel. After examining the East African Coast trade, the next section shall lay emphasis on regional trade.

C- Regional Trade

Intra-regional trade in Africa goes back to pre-historic times as evidence exists of the earliest African communities exchanging items such as metals, stone tools, and shells [49]. Trade accelerated with the emergence of agricultural settlements, the establishment of towns, and the development of complex political systems such as chiefdoms, kingdoms, and empires. Trade patterns in the pre-colonial period were shaped by variations in local resources as well as differences in climate, geography, technology, and population density [50]. That many of Africa's regions share different cultural trajectories is beyond questioning and in fact produced a very interesting history of the continent and its peoples [51]. Pre-colonial West African societies were more specialized than societies in the rest of Africa, and their specialisation seems to have increased over

time [52]. Trade and the use of slaves were far more developed in West Africa, in both the forest and the savannah regions. In the forest areas, gold mining developed in specific locations. Regional and long-distance trade played an instrumental role in cultural exchange, in the introduction of new technologies and regional integration. Literature on pre-colonial trade in Africa highlights three main ethnic groups in West Africa: the Madingues, the Haoussa, and the Yoruba. Mande traders and blacksmiths from medieval Mali incorporated the Akan forest into trans-Saharan trade networks, introduced to the Akan the technology of deep-level mining (nkoron), and bequeathed to the Akan language several Mande loan words associated with trade, transport, and social categories, asra (snuff), tawa (tobacco), samina (soap), krataa (paper), ponko (horse), yoma (camel), okoroo (boat), and kramo (Muslim) [53].

Indigenous gold production was well established by the 13th century and gold was traded with the Islamic merchants on the East African coast. Trade between East and Central Africa had started as early as the 1st Milenium AD, where Raffia cloth, ivory, hides, forest products and copper, from Central Africa were exchanged with salt, spices, textiles and gold from East Africa. Major market centres were: Kilwa and Zanzibar [54]. This involved movements of people from local to international levels all over East Africa also called pre-colonial caravan trade [55]. It was practiced between the coastal merchants and interior tribes, covering very long distances from the interior to the coast. Long distances had to be covered in caravans of between 100-1000 men to and from the coast, taking months or even a year before reaching there and back [56]. The main participants in the trade included Nyamwezi, Kamba, Yao, Chagga, Kikuyu, Baganda, Banyoro and the Luo, who traded with the Arabs and Swahili people at the coast [57]. Trade was initially conducted on a barter basis i.e. goods exchanged for goods. Later on, cowrie shells were introduced but these were also later replaced by small copper coins. This trade was disrupted by the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century. The Portuguese wanted monopoly rights over the gold trade

Retrieved from, <https://elibrary.acbfact.org/acbf/collect/acbf/index/assoc/HASH0100/039e055d/606b9c4a/9550.dir/History-of-African-Trade.pdf>, on 28 June 2025.

⁴⁶ G. Pwiti, "Trade and Economies in Southern Africa: The Archaeological Evidence," *Zambezia* 18.2, 1991, pp. 119–129.

⁴⁷ Moradi, "Commodity Trade and Development: Theory, History, Future", p.60.

⁴⁸ S. I. Mudenge, *A Political History of Munhumutapa c 1400–1902*, London, James Currey, 1988.

⁴⁹ Yaduma and Khan, "Intra-Regional Trade and African Economic Integration", p. 279.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Shadreck Chirikure, "Documenting Precolonial Trade in Africa."

⁵² Erik Green, "Production Systems in Pre-colonial Africa", Ewout Frankema et al. (eds), *The History of African Development: A Textbook for a New Generation of African Students and Teachers*, the African Economic History Network, the Netherlands, 2023, p. 34.

⁵³ Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1993.

⁵⁴ J. Mulindwa, Precolonial Trade in the Interior of East Africa, retrieved from <https://asbatlibrary.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/4653f2e1-3c2d-49a1-915a-00409e559490-S2%20%20HISTORY%20%20PRE-%20colonial%20societies.pdf>, 16 August 2025.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

with Africans and thus waged war on the coastal Islamic traders. These wars, together with the rise of the Atlantic slave trade and the spread of diseases from Europe, led to a drastic decline in gold production. By the end of the 18th century gold mining and trade were only marginal activities in the region [58]. After examining the foregoing, the subsequent section shall scrutinize how ancient African trade systems could help enhance AfCFTA objectives and Outcomes.

VI. Ancient African Trade Insights for the AfCFTA and Outcomes

Lessons derived from ancient African trade practices provide a critical framework for understanding and enhancing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). These historical trade networks not only facilitated economic exchanges, but also fostered cultural integration and community relationships. By examining the significance of trade networks, the role of barter systems, and the importance of localized economies, we can glean insights into how these elements contributed to thriving societies. Furthermore, exploring the diversity of goods and services, the nuances of negotiations and diplomacy, and the imperative of transportation and infrastructure development reveals a comprehensive approach that modern trade agreements can adopt. As AfCFTA seeks to unify markets across Africa, these ancient lessons offer compelling strategies for achieving sustainable economic growth and regional cohesion.

A. Importance of Trade Networks

Enhancing collaboration among African nations is crucial for economic growth, stability, and sustainable development. Ancient trade practices prospered through extensive networks, established by caravans of Sahara and coastal traders. Ancient traders formed networks and alliances that expanded their trade reach, as seen among desert traders and coastal merchants, prioritizing intra-African exchanges. The Trans-Saharan Trade connected West African empires (Ghana, Mali, Songhai) with North Africa/Mediterranean, through large caravan systems. The city of Timbuktu became a major trading hub and centre of learning, attracting scholars and traders, which boosted the local economy and facilitated wealth accumulation. The gold mines of West Africa provided great wealth to Empires such as Ghana, Mali and Songhai, rooted in their control over gold and salt trade routes [59]. Gao, served as a trading centre for the Mali and Songhai Empires, Kano in Nigeria, known for its textiles, Agadez in Niger facilitated trade across the Sahara, Siljmassa in Morocco, served as a gateway for

goods entering North Africa and Walata in Mauritania known for its gold trade. Trade with ancient Africa gave Rome various precious exotic goods: ivory, myrrh, incense, tortoise shells, and slaves. This made the maritime trade between Rome and Africa, last for centuries, facilitating economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations. The wealth from gold mining in West Africa enabled these empires to invest in infrastructure and military power, enhancing regional influence. The Swahili Coast Maritime trade routes on the other hand, linked East African city-states (Kilwa, Mombasa) with Arabia, India and China for spices, ivory, gold, while internal networks through vast river systems (Nile, Niger, Congo) and overland routes facilitated trade in food, metals and crafts between diverse groups on the continent. In East Africa, goods from the interior included ivory, animals, Skins, Slaves, Gold, Bee wax, salt, and copper, that were exchanged for goods like beads, guns, mirrors, clothes and glass which were brought by the coastal people [60]. Indeed, the benefits of relatively open markets can be found throughout African history and across all regions of the continent. Ancient African trade networks survived through agreements, based on customs, kinship, and local pacts, not formal written treaties.

Just like ancient African traders, AfCFTA should reinforce and shape trade networks among member states to enhance interconnectivity and collaboration in order to facilitate broader market access. AfCFTA should as such, formalize and unify RECs, encouraging them to minimize trade barriers; embark on joint infrastructure projects to improve connectivity and trade; development of regional transport corridors and energy grids that are of great importance to continental integration. This will enable it achieve its most ambitious goal of creating a single market and fulfilling the long-held dreams of continental unity from the 1960s OAU/AU initiatives, kickstarted by precursors like EAC and ECOWAS to foster regional trade. It will further help Africa regain through the effective implementation of AfCFTA what it once had in terms of trade and regional integration before European colonisation. This unifying agenda for economic integration will also solve the issue of overlapping memberships, where countries belong to multiple regional organizations, leading to confusion and competition among initiatives, diluting commitment and complicating policy implementation [61]. For instance, the East African Community (EAC) has made enhancing strides in integrating member states like Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania through the EAC Common Market Protocol, which allows free movement of goods, services, and labour [62]. According to a 2017

⁵⁸ Erik Green, "Production Systems in Pre-colonial Africa", p. 34.

⁵⁹ Akyeampong, *History of African Trade*, p.6.

⁶⁰ Mulindwa, "Precolonial Trade in the Interior of East Africa".

⁶¹ Yaduma and Khan, "Intra-Regional Trade and African Economic Integration", pp. 292-293

⁶² George Fuh Kum, "Enigma of Sub-Regional Integration in Africa: case of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC),

World Economic Forum study, the multiplication of regional economic communities and their overlap represent a brake on the growth of businesses in view of the unfavourable environment [63]. Future efforts can focus on harmonizing such regulations to facilitate deeper continental economic integration.

B. Barter and Localized Economies

Ancient African kingdoms and trade networks had their own mediums of exchange, ranging from the barter mechanism to standard weights and measures (cowrie shells, gold dust, beads and others), ensuring fair direct trade in goods and services without the use of money. In the absence of formal currencies, these mediums required mutual trust between traders for fair exchanges. They relied on the honesty of counterparts during transactions. Trust facilitated open negotiations and reciprocal arrangements, where favours and debts were expected to be honoured, fostering business relationships. Trade also grew due to the use of ancient African indigenous technologies or craftsmanship. It is important to note that because of trade, kingdoms like Oku, Bamun, Kom, Bafut and Babanki in Cameroon, engaged in some form of industrial production for exchange and sale to needy communities.⁶⁴ They produced farming tools and war weapons like cutlasses, hoes, spears, axes, bow and arrows and others, notwithstanding art and craft works, related to the production of masks, boxes and drums [65]. Blacksmithing, iron bending, carving, weaving and others were major occupations that helped produce what could be exchanged or sold for other African goods and items, that were scarce in their localities. The importance of the barter system and other measures in upholding ancient African trade cannot be overemphasized.

Just like in ancient Africa, there is need for a unique African currency for AfCFTA's easy intra-African transactions. Trade succeeded in ancient Africa, because they had their own mediums of exchange. Localized currency systems, the standardization of products and trade regulations would facilitate trade without relying heavily on foreign currencies, which will simplify processes and reduce trade barriers. The deliberate or insentient failure of most African states to craft their own economic development models, but maintaining colonial protectionist models, is highly misleading to their economies. To enhance trust, AfCFTA can craft E-government initiatives through the implementation of digital platforms for government services to enhance transparency and efficiency in cross-border trade and investment as this could be an effective

way forward for it, notwithstanding inter-operable digital payment solutions or digital payment systems across borders to ease transactions and reduce costs for businesses, like the Smart Africa Alliance Initiative (SAAI). This initiative launched in Rwanda aims to accelerate the digital transformation of African countries. By promoting policies that inspire trust, wideband access and e-governance, countries can enhance collaboration on digital trade and improve service delivery on the continent. According to African Union projections, the African economy will be able to grow twice as fast as developed countries [66].

C. Cultural Exchange and Integration

Ancient African trade routes facilitated the exchange of not just goods, but also cultural practices, languages, and knowledge that led to mutual understanding and shared identities among different communities. The spread of Islam through Trans-Saharan routes profoundly impacted West African cultures, as traders converted to it. Arabs and North Africans, brought with them new religious practices, educational systems and legal frameworks, which became integrated into local societies. This was mostly through the conversion of rulers and elites, such as Sundiata Keita and Mansa Musa of the Mali Empire, Askia Muhammad of the Songhai Empire and Sancore University scholars, who embarked on the establishment of Islamic schools, spread of its teachings and integration of Islamic law into local governance in their empires. Mansa Musa even went further to pay a pilgrimage to Mecca. Indigenous local art forms (architecture and textiles) got also influenced by Islamic aesthetics. In the East African Coast, interactions with Arab and Persian merchants led to the development of Swahili, a Bantu language enriched with Arabic vocabulary [67]. This facilitated communication and cultural exchange, leading to a unique Swahili culture, characterised by art, architecture, and literature, symbolising a cultural fusion, resulting from trade. The architectural styles of Swahili city-states (Kilwa Kisiwani, Mombassa, Zanzibar and Pemba), influenced by Arab designs, led to the construction of coral stone buildings and mosques. Cultural exchanges contributed enormously in not just enhancing African integration through trade, but also connected Africa to the North, Middle East, India and beyond.

AfCFTA just like ancient African trade exchanges should encourage cross-border cultural initiatives and knowledge-sharing initiatives among member states to foster unity and enhance trade relations

1994-2020", *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai*, 2024, p.154.

⁶³ World Economic Forum on Africa, "Achieving Inclusive Growth through Responsive and Responsible Leadership", Durban, South Africa 3-5 May 2017.

⁶⁴ V.G. Fanzo, 86 Years Emeritus Professor of History, University of Yaounde I, Yaounde, 3rd January 2026

⁶⁵ Idem.

⁶⁶ African Union, Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. PART II Non Discrimination - Article 4: Most Favoured Nation Treatment, 2012.

⁶⁷ Moradi, Commodity Trade and Development: Theory, History, Future, p.8.

as this would promote cultural dialogue, collaboration and innovative practices that cater to diverse markets. Shared languages and communication facilitated trade across diverse cultures, as seen in the use of lingua francas like Swahili (East African Coast) and pidgin English (Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana etc). AfCFTA should therefore foster language learning and communication channels to enhance interpersonal trade relations on the continent. Promote programs on cultural exchange initiatives that foster understanding and dialogue among nations to build trust and collaboration. Cultural and social barriers emanating from differences in languages, cultures, and social norms can impede cooperation and development.⁶⁸ Social tensions may arise from apparent inequalities in benefits from incorporation. Promoting cultural exchange programs and regional campaigns can enhance understanding and cooperation among diverse populations, fostering a sense of shared identity. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and others, if well enhanced could be such important frameworks, to encourage member states to assess their governance practices and promote cooperation and transparency, addressing political and social barriers.

D. Community-Centric Trading

In ancient Africa, trade relied on community networks and trust. By fostering partnerships between businesses, cooperatives, and communities across borders, it was a community-oriented activity, relying on mutual benefits among local traders. Trade often involved neighbouring societies and was geared toward meeting the needs of local populations. Goods were exchanged not just for profit, but to support communal well-being. Communities worked together to protect their interests, often pooling resources to facilitate trade. This included sharing knowledge about markets and resources. Trade practices were intertwined with cultural values, traditions, and identities, reinforcing social bonds and collective participation in economic activities. It allowed societies to thrive in diverse environments, promoting social cohesion, while ensuring the effective exchange of goods and services. This practice, contrasts sharply with modern, often individualistic commercial practices, offering valuable lessons in collaboration and ethical commerce. By focusing on local resources and sustainable practices, ancient African communities

ensured long-term economic viability rather than exploitative short-term gains. It did often involve local chiefs and leaders, who facilitated trade agreements and ensured community buy-in.

AfCFTA can create a supportive environment for commerce, where all African countries should feel like a community, supporting local businesses, cooperatives and other community-driven trade initiatives to empower grassroots economic development just as was the case in Ancient Africa. As such, it should engage local leaders in policy-making and trade agreements to ensure they reflect community interests and needs, by harmonising customs procedures, tariffs, and trade regulations through bilateral and multilateral agreements [69]. These will complement existing regional frameworks, enhance market access and investment opportunities, ensuring that businesses, especially small and medium size Enterprises (SMEs), and the general public are aware of their benefits [70]. SMEs represent the majority of companies in Africa, which means that they are essential for the continent's growth [71]. Creating initiatives for SMEs to access regional markets and funding opportunities. Foster partnerships between governments and the private sector to drive investment in infrastructure, innovation, and technology. Private sector partners like the African Business Forum, a platform that brings together business leaders from across Africa to discuss investment opportunities and challenges is a perfect alternative. Encouraging public-private partnerships can lead to collaborative projects in sectors like infrastructure and technology that are very important for Africa's development, cooperation and integration. While governments play a fundamental role in promoting the digital economy, the importance of the private sector as a major source of jobs cannot be overstated [72]. Just like Datta *et al.*, Barasa and Kiiru opine that supply-side interventions include initiatives that provide unemployed youth with hardware and software to facilitate e-learning [73].

E. Diversity of Goods and Services

In ancient African societies, diversification rather than specialisation was the most important

⁶⁸ Afu Asaih, 48 years, Development Anthropologist, University of Yaounde I, Yaounde, 8th January 2026.

⁶⁹ International Trade Centre, *A business guide to the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement*, ITC, Geneva, 2018.

⁷⁰ GIZ, "Successes in Regional Economic Integration Stories from GIZ programmes across Africa", p.6.

⁷¹ I. O. Ogunyemi, "African Continental Free Trade Area: Challenges and Opportunities for Small and Medium Scale Enterprises in Nigeria", *American Journal of Business Economics and Management*, 5(4), 2017, pp.30–37.

⁷² N. Datta, A. E. Assy, J. Buba, De Silva S. Johansson, and S. Watson, "Integrated Youth Employment Programs: A Stocktake of Evidence on What Works in Youth Employment Programs", Working Paper, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018a.

⁷³ Laura Barasa and Joy M. Kiiru, "The Digital Economy and Youth Employment in Africa", Gedion Onyango (ed.) *Public Policy and Technological Transformations in Africa: Nurturing Policy Entrepreneurship, Policy Tools and Citizen Participation*, Palgrave MacMillian, p. 177.

strategy for coping with hunger crises and famines [74]. They adapted to environmental changes, shifting trade routes and products as conditions changed (e.g., droughts) [75]. People grew a variety of crops and tried, as far as possible, to exploit a variety of environments. Historical trade practices were often adapted to effectively utilise local resources in order to encourage intra-African exchanges and mitigate risks involved with specialisation. Atlantic trade brought some benefits; it was the export trade in slaves that was detrimental. Atlantic trade introduced new crops and ideas that benefitted Africa. One cannot imagine the agricultural history and diet of Africa today without New World crops such as maize, cassava (manioc), sweet potatoes and groundnuts (peanuts) [76]. These models accelerated the emergence of agricultural settlements, establishment of towns and development of complex political systems such as chiefdoms, kingdoms, and empires [77]. The trade between Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa was on gold, salt ivory, tobacco, copper, spices, ebony, kola nuts, cloth, slaves, metal goods, beads, slaves and others. These goods were exchanged for North African ones such as horses, books, swords and chain mail [78]. The East African Coast trade was on spices, ivory, gold and textiles and cities such as Kilwa and Mombasa flourished as trade ports. The trade in ivory and gold with Arab and Indian merchants led to the establishment of a vibrant economy, while the influx of foreign goods and cultures transformed local societies. Imports brought new goods: luxury items and later, firearms, which influenced local economies and power dynamics. The Great Lakes Region's key trade items were: cattle, iron, and agricultural products. Trade networks connecting this region to the interior allowed for the exchange of iron tools and cattle. This enhanced agricultural productivity and contributed to the rise of powerful kingdoms like Buganda, which thrived on trade and resource management. The introduction of new agricultural techniques and crops, like rice and sugarcane, through trade networks improved food security and diversity in various regions, enhancing local economies and diets. It can therefore be contended that ancient Africa's survival and prosperity did thus greatly depend on the mutual benefits from intra-community and regional trade.

AfCFTA can promote local production through the use of indigenous materials to boost economic resilience through self-sufficiency. AfCFTA can focus on diversifying economies and industries to buffer against economic shocks or global crises [79]. Ancient trade networks relied heavily on local natural resources, such as gold, textiles, spices, salt, and ivory, which were strategically traded. Focusing on leveraging Africa's diverse natural resources sustainably to boost intra-African trade could be a way out for AfCFTA promoting intra-African trade to enhance its volume and economic resilience, while consolidating a single market for the region. Again, instead of continuously depending on the production and exportation of raw materials, African states should engage on processing their primary goods, in order to attract more trade opportunities within and beyond the continent [80]. Only in this way could the much awaited "made in Africa," products dream come true. Comparatively, as at 2014, intra-regional trade as a percentage of total African trade (the value of total exports and imports), was the lowest in the world, accounting for only 10 percent of total trade in the continent, but comprised 70 percent of all trade in Europe, 48 percent of all trade in Asia, and 20 percent of all trade in Latin America [81]. This is not because of the many agreements signed among African states liberalising trade, but due to other costs and obstacles. To stop the trend and encourage them to prioritize their neighbours over partners outside the continent, it was stipulated in Article 18 of AfCFTA agreement that, State Parties shall accord each other, on a reciprocal basis, preferences that will be no less favorable than those given to Third Parties [82]. The abundance of natural resources has more often than not proven to be bad rather than good for African economies. According to World Bank data, in 2010, 75 percent of South Africa's exports were based on five natural products [83]. Overdependence on exports of natural resources and raw materials discourages diversification in African economies, hinders investment in industrialisation and leads low productivity. This is impeding the realisation of the greater economic integration and intra-Africa trade [84].

F. Negotiations and Diplomacy

⁷⁴ Ewout Frankema et al. (eds), *The History of African Development: A Textbook for a New Generation of African Students and Teachers*, the African Economic History Network, the Netherlands, 2023, p. 34.

⁷⁵ Frankema et al. (eds), *The History of African Development*, p. 36.

⁷⁶ Emmanuel, Akyeampong, *History of African Trade*.

⁷⁷ Yaduma and Khan, "Intra-Regional Trade and African Economic Integration", p. 279.

⁷⁸ Alexander Moradi, "Commodity Trade and Development", p.6.

⁷⁹ Frankema et al. (eds), *The History of African Development*, p. 10.

⁸⁰ C. Freund, and N., Rocha, "What Constrains Africa's Exports?" The World Bank Development Research Group - Trade and Integration Team, Working Paper 5184, 2010.

⁸¹ Yaduma and Khan, "Intra-Regional Trade and African Economic Integration", p.292.

⁸² African Union, "Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. Part V - Article 18: Continental Preferences, 2012.

⁸³ Freund and Rocha, "What Constrains Africa's Exports?"

⁸⁴ Yaduma and Khan, "Intra-Regional Trade and African Economic Integration", p.292.

In ancient Africa, fruitful trade relied on establishing trust and maintaining a good reputation within communities and across regions. Trade operated under established rules, oaths, and customary laws, often enforced by powerful rulers or community elders, not formal continental treaties. Rulers made agreements (treaties/pacts) with other states for specific caravan security, tribute, or access to resources. Trade networks relied on negotiation and alliances to resolve conflicts, helping maintain trade relations. For instance, the Sanankuoya, a sacred bond in Mali, akin to ritualised relationship or kinship, established between individuals or groups, prevented warfare and fostered trust among parties especially in trade deals. Disputes were also settled by trusted community leaders and or councils of respected elders, focusing on restorative justice and community harmony, ensuring trade routes remained safe. Rules for market days, weights/measures, and caravan conduct were broadly valued, creating functional frameworks. Trust formed the backbone of trade; transactions were often built on longstanding relationships, where reputation and personal history played significant roles. It facilitated open negotiations and reciprocal arrangements, where favours and debts were expected to be honoured, fostering business relationships.

AfCFTA should create transparent mechanisms and good will in trade agreements in order to build trust among member states. This necessitates a strong political will, to implement and respect regional integration agreements, aimed at eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers among states, hence solving the issue of differing national interests within AfCFTA which has been a major challenge for regional integration. In fact, African countries have divergent economic priorities and policies, making it difficult to reach consensus on integration initiatives. ECOWAS member states for instance, have varying levels of economic development and priorities. While Nigeria prioritises oil exports, smaller economies like Sierra Leone focus on agricultural development, leading to conflicting trade policies. The AfCFTA should establish clear negotiation frameworks that allow for compromise, to help align national interests. In other words, developing mechanisms to ensure that all member states benefit from integration can foster cooperation. This could include financial support for less developed countries. Providing training and resources to help countries align their policies with regional integration goals can also create a more cohesive approach. African trade blocs should not only focus on reducing tariffs, but non-tariff barriers as well, such as quotas, import licensing, and administrative bottlenecks which remain great obstacles for AfCFTA's success [85]. This makes it more complex to pursue regional integration successfully, since the divergence in the rules applied has led to higher trade costs. Again, the

many custom check points and harassments along intra-African highways should also be checked as they significantly impede trade, making it more expensive on average than trade between African countries and non-African countries. These barriers encouraged informal Cross-Border trade among countries like Cameroon and Nigeria which is a major market for the former's exports under the Free Trade regime [86].

G. Transportation and Infrastructure Development

Precolonial African trade focused on varied transport systems whereby, caravans of camels and donkeys were used across deserts; with canoes and rafts along rivers and coasts, supported by well excavated paths and simple roads, to facilitate vast exchanges. The establishment of trade routes and markets in ancient times required significant infrastructure, including roads and trading posts. Trade flourished where there were established routes and infrastructure, such as roads and market towns. The Trans-Saharan trade in gold, salt, and ivory, with West African empires (Ghana, Mali and Songhai), using caravans of camels and donkeys across the desert, developed organized routes and markets for the movement of goods and economic growth. Caravans consisted of hundreds, sometimes even thousands, of camels, moving from oasis to oasis until they reached the markets in the Sahel region [87]. The city of Timbuctu boosted the local economy and facilitated wealth accumulation. Gao, grew into a trading town for the Mali and Songhai Empires; Kano in Nigeria was known for its textiles and Agadez in Niger, facilitated trade across the Sahara; Siljmassa in Morocco, served as a gateway for goods entering North Africa and Walata in Mauritania was known for its gold trade. Infrastructure was always effective and adaptable for moving people and commodities across challenging terrains. The Swahili Coast trade and internal network routes, used canoes, rafts, foot paths and roads to linked East African city-states (Kilwa, Mombasa) with Arabia, India and China, while internal networks through vast river systems: the Nile, Niger, Congo and overland routes facilitated trade between diverse groups on the continent. There were also well-developed trading ports. Some powerful states, like the Kingdom of Benin, developed well-aligned roads and streets, distinct from simple footpaths, for organized movement.

The AfCFTA can invest in transportation infrastructure and logistics to facilitate smoother and more efficient trade movements. The very poor and inadequate road, air, railway and maritime infrastructure, linking states and intra-African economic communities notwithstanding unreliable energy supply has delayed integration in Africa [88]. AfCFTA can prioritize infrastructure development, ensuring easier movement of goods and people across the continent. Poor infrastructure hinders trade facilitation and increases

⁸⁵ Bama Etienne Cham

⁸⁶ Idem.

⁸⁷ Moradi, "Commodity Trade and Development", p.6.

⁸⁸ Bama Etienne Cham.

costs. Infrastructure deficits disproportionately affect landlocked countries, making it difficult for them to access markets [89]. In East Africa, countries like Tanzania and Kenya face significant infrastructure deficits, particularly in road and rail networks as it takes several days to transport goods from the port of Mombasa to inland destinations. It is expected that AfCFTA would coordinate the idea where governments' private sectors, prioritize infrastructure projects, potentially through public-private partnerships. The East African Community (EAC) has initiated projects like the Northern Corridor, enhancing transport connectivity between member states. The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa's (PIDA) cross-border projects to improve connectivity and trade facilitation should be encouraged. To encourage national production, several African countries have implemented import-minimization policies, which has led them to adopt protectionist measures [90]. Just like in ancient Africa, exploiting African rivers like the Nile, Congo, Zambesi, Limpopo, Senegal, Kassai, Okavango, Rufigi and the Volta, can play an indispensable role in supporting the AfCFTA, on transportation and trade facilitation, infrastructure and agriculture and food security as more than 60 percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa are smallholder farmers, and about 23 percent of the region's GDP comes from agriculture [91], economic development, cross border collaboration etc.

H. Education and Training

In ancient Africa, trade education was informal and practical, relying heavily on a groundwork system, where the youth learned by observing and imitating their masters (elders, skilled traders, artisans) in real-life settings like workshops or trade routes, supplemented by oral traditions, storytelling and community involvement, to teach values, history, and specific trade knowledge, fostering hands-on skills and economic integration [92]. Africans understood metallurgy and made spears from iron and copper [93]. Artisans wove fine cloths, baskets and beer was brewed from bananas and grain [94]. Skills and knowledge were often passed down generations, enhancing trade capabilities and practices [95]. Education played a vital role in sharing trade practices

and techniques, enhancing traders' expertise. Integrity, cooperation, and community responsibility, essential for building trust in trade networks were inculcated [96]. This model sharply contrasts with the modern, often individualistic commercial practices, offering valuable lessons in collaboration and ethical commerce. The Igbo people developed sophisticated models like *Igba-osohia*, an informal discipleship for commerce, focusing on cooperation, integrity, and resource management, incorporating complex mathematical and systemic thinking through hands-on practice [97]. By focusing on local resources and sustainable practices, communities ensured long-term economic viability rather than exploitative short-term gains. Negotiation, resource management, accounting (often rudimentary), and specific craft skills (e.g., ironworking, weaving) were equally the order of the day [98]. As pointed out by Dugard the learning of languages of Africa involved amazing six hundred dialects which had spun from one tongue as tribes spread out across the continent in over a thousand of years [99], this indicates the importance ancient Africans attached to language as a communication tool for effective trade exchanges.

For an effective AfCFTA, it can Promote knowledge-sharing platforms and trade education initiatives to enhance capacity building, by creating platforms for sharing data and research findings related to trade, economic development, and public health to inform policy decisions. Endorse collaborative research projects among universities and research institutions that address regional challenges. The African Open Science Platform initiative that aims to promote open access to scientific data and research across the continent is a perfect option, there is need for more. Encouraging countries to share research findings can help address common challenges, such as health crises and agricultural productivity. Many African countries, particularly those with smaller economies, lack the capacity and resources to effectively implement commitments, including negotiating trade agreements and enforcing regulations [100]. These training programs would improve their trade skills and knowledge, enhancing their competitiveness. Implementing student

⁸⁹ Idem.

⁹⁰ Boutaleb, Regional Integration: Can it Bring More Independence to Africa? Policy Brief - N° 24/22, Policy Centre for the New South, April 2022, p.5.

⁹¹ GIZ, "Successes in Regional Economic Integration Stories from GIZ programmes across Africa", p.22.

⁹² Dama Mosweunyane, "The African Educational Evolution: From Traditional Training to Formal Education", *Higher Education Studies of the Canadian Center of Science and Education*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2013, pp.52-53 (pp.50-59).

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ A. Datta, *Education and society: A sociology of African Education*, London: Macmillan, 1984.

⁹⁶ Mosweunyane, "The African Educational Evolution: pp.52-53.

⁹⁷ Vincent Onyemachukwu Umeh "The Phenomenon Of 'Igbo Oso-Ahia' In Igbo Entrepreneurship in a Modern Industrial Society", *African Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, Vol. 14 No. 5 2024, p. 1984.

⁹⁸ K. Koma, *Education in black Africa. Mahalapye*, Botswana National Front Secretariat, 1976.

⁹⁹ M. Dugard, *Into Africa*, London: Transworld Publishers, 2003.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Ntangsi, 70 years, Former Representative of the *KFW* Cameroon (German Development Bank) Cameroon, Yaoundé, 3rd August 2015.

and professional exchange programs to foster cross-cultural understanding and build networks among young leaders can also be very impactful. A good example is the African Union's Continental Education Strategy, which aims to harmonize educational policies across member states. The GIZ support program to the AfCFTA trained more than 550 customs officials in 2021, on AfCFTA regulations to ensure smooth implementation of the new customs regulations [101]. Key sectors, like agriculture and technology are equally essential in fostering innovation and skill development [102].

Harnessing the lessons of ancient African trade is essential for the successful implementation of AfCFTA. The importance of robust trade networks, cultural exchanges, and community-driven initiatives underscores the necessity for a collaborative approach to economic integration. By focusing on localized economies and promoting a diverse range of goods and services, AfCFTA can foster inclusive economic development. Additionally, prioritizing education and training in negotiation and infrastructure development will empower communities and enhance trade capacity. Ultimately, by integrating these ancient practices into modern frameworks, Africa can pave the way for a prosperous and interconnected future, fostering not only economic growth but also cultural unity across the continent.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of ancient African trade networks has revealed invaluable insights that can significantly contribute to the successful implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area. As demonstrated through historical trade relationships, the importance of collective economic engagement, cultural exchange, and the development of infrastructure cannot be inconspicuous. The principles embedded in these ancient networks resonate with the core objectives of AfCFTA, underscoring the need for inclusive and community-centric approaches to trade. By leveraging lessons from the past, such as the diversification of goods and services, localized economies, and collaborative diplomacy, African nations can enhance their negotiation strategies and strengthen connectivity through improved transportation and logistics. As the continent moves toward increased economic integration, reflecting on these ancient trade practices not only provides a roadmap for enhancing AfCFTA's effectiveness, but also rejuvenates the spirit of cooperation and unity that has characterized African trade for centuries. Embracing this legacy will not only yield economic benefits, but also reinforce cultural ties and mutual understanding among Africa's diverse populations, setting the stage for a shared future of growth and prosperity across the continent.

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¹⁰¹ GIZ, "Successes in Regional Economic Integration Stories from GIZ programmes across Africa" p.20.

¹⁰² Joseph Ntangsi.

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