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Networks, trust and norms of indigenous institutions: *trader network behaviour in challenging environments*

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Abstract. This paper suggests that the key to entrepreneurial success lies in the ability to maintain trust-based networks and respect social norms. In elaborating this proposition, this article draws on the results of an exploratory study of 30 Nigerian traders to demonstrate how using an ‘institutional’ lens provides new insights into the influence of trust and indigenous norms on entrepreneurial behaviour. The concept of morality which presupposes an understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour, is introduced to offer a supple and adaptable explanation for how actors rely on social norms to build trade networks. At the centre, trust was found to be indispensable to networks relationships and necessary for enforcing sanctions. The results facilitate a rich understanding of how a range of trust-based networks relationships and hybrid indigenous norms underpin entrepreneurial behaviour in Nigeria. The study contributes by providing well founded insights into the entrepreneurship within an African context.

Keywords: norms, networks, trust, institutions, Nigeria, Africa

1.Introduction

Traditionally, much of the studies on entrepreneurship have been focused on the activities of western businesses and multinational corporations (Chell and Baines, 2000; McDougall and Oviatt, 2000; Bruton *et al.*, 2010; Welter and Smallbone, 2011). While there have been few attempts to examine the functions of African entrepreneurs in relation to the influence of indigenous institutions (Lyon and Porter, 2009; Amoako and Lyon, 2014), many of the questions which require propounding remain to be answered. To date, the fast-growing interest on West African entrepreneurship lays increasing interest in the distinctiveness of context and small business development. However, one of the central issues facing West African countries is the need to develop strong formal institutions, allowing entrepreneurship to thrive.

The most trite yet crucial question in the field of entrepreneurship concerns the extent to which African entrepreneurship is distinct compared with mature economies. Traditional insights about the structure and design of African entrepreneurship are gained by recognising that collaborative relationships underpinned by trust and specific norms enhance competitiveness (Amoako, 2019; Omeihe *et al.*, 2021). Trust – to use the definition of Lewis and Weigert -can be conceived simply as a property of collective units (*ongoing dyads, groups, and collectivities*). A more detailed version indicates a mutual but unique ‘faithfulness’ in which social relationships ultimately depend (Simmel, 1990; Lewis and Weigert, 1985). This specific definition implies that trust is the functional and appropriate lubricant through which a society thrives.

The attention to the discourse on trust has provided well-meaning explanations of a functional portrait which reduces complexities and enhances social interactions. Its effect on entrepreneurial action allows for functional interpersonal and institutionalised relationships. The matter of trust has continued to gain increased attention across extant studies (Fukuyama, 1995; Zaheer *et al.*, 1998; Bromiley and Harris, 2006). This is partly because trust plays an

important function of minimising inefficiencies and reducing transactions costs (Bromiley and Cummings, 1995; Noorderhaven, 1995; Uzzi, 1997). The need for trust emerges in risky situations where a high degree of uncertainty exists (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). In this stem, trust removes the need for contracts which are often costly to monitor and enforce (Barney and Hansen, 1994, Dyer and Chu, 2003; Mollering, 2006). Within an African context, the case of Nigerian small-scale traders stands out as they operate in a world of dysfunctional government institutions, incomplete markets with little access to bank credit and transportation infrastructure. In fact, the Nigerian context provides a fertile ground as the empirical point of departure offers the opportunity to probe issues concerning trust development, social norms and networks. These issues are worth understanding as it favours the exploration of findings which are not pronounced within African scholarship.

Following Faulkner (2010), we define social norms as expectations which conforms to a socially established way of living and are acceptable within a given society. Social norms possess a grip on the mind, as violations provoke a feeling of shame and guilt on the part of the wrongdoer. In this study, we attempt to advance the knowledge of how prevailing social norms enhance entrepreneurial action. Within this matter and quite importantly, the article differs from related studies which glide over the Africa's socio-economic context, thus leading to incorrect assumptions and macro-theorisations. The advantage we provide forms a basis for uncovering the concept of the moral economy-an economy where entrepreneurial activities is viewed through a moral lens and underpinned by a value system. It captures the interplay between social norms and entrepreneurial activity to determine how social pressures influence actors to conform to norms at the expense of profits.

We rest on the normative commitments that govern an actor's moral disposition and cultural identity, as this raises an appreciation of how norms and trust produce moral responses that facilitate cooperation among trade networks. To achieve this, the paper captures the morality of institutional forms in facilitating economic exchange within contexts constrained by weak institutional arrangements.

It is a moot point whether the phenomenon of Nigerian trader-owned enterprises have been adequately represented within the fields of sociology and entrepreneurship studies. In fact, the activities of African traders do not seem to feature prominently within established studies. This creates the impression of not being accorded comparable measures of intellectual scope like their western counterparts. It is difficult to overstate that since the pre-colonial era, indigenous traders have developed unique strategies to facilitate trade by relying on culturally specific relationships. To a good extent, the predicament of Nigerian traders has sociological antecedents which are rooted in historical patterns of material practices and beliefs that provide meanings to their social reality.

Oddly, given the peculiarity of the Nigerian context, compelling persuasive explanations with reference to institutions are not complete without a focus on networks functioning in the shadows of formal institutional arrangements. In the interim, however, much of the studies on networks emphasise important categories of benefits; which include access to

market information (Nee and Ingram, 1998; Amoako and Lyon, 2014). And more importantly, vital linkages which generate access in an expeditious manner over actors who lack comparable connections (Burt, 2000; Omeihe, 2019). At the forefront of our fresh point of departure, an attention to trade networks provides a contextual portrait to the social life of Nigerian traders. Without question, Nigeria's case provides a fruitful ground as this study seeks to examine the embedded norms which underpin trust-based networks. Although the study does not seek to offer a penetrating coverage of Nigeria's difficult market conditions, it focuses attention selectively on the concept of institutional rivalry to describe features of indigenous institutions that flourish in parallel to dysfunctional formal institutions. This logic seeks to highlight a range of hybrid indigenous institutional forms that have evolved in the context of weak formal institutions. As a consequence, the empirical terrain is guided by the investigation of 30 small-scale traders operating in the markets across north central and southern Nigeria.

To add a further distinctive element, whilst this article may appear to cast light on the common knowledge of institutional void, we state explicitly that it is not the void or absence of institutions that exist within the Nigerian context, but the existence of institutional rivalry (this is introduced as the interplay of two institutional frameworks- *formal and indigenous*). This is a novel but under researched phenomenon. This inevitably poses questions about the impact of such indigenous institutional forms as it creates the norms shaping trader relationships. We believe that this contribution will facilitate theoretical engagement and its application to policy discourse. The rest of this paper proceeds by pursuing an inventory of trust, norms and network relationships. The results from the fieldwork facilitates a better understanding of the range of trust-based relationships and social norms that underpin trade within Nigeria. The conclusions follow by proposing directions for further empirical and theoretical developments.

2. Dimensions of trust and social norms

The interest in trust as a foundation for social interactions has gained increased interest across many intellectual disciplines. Although scholars allude to it as a fundamental lubricant which shapes social interactions (Gambetta, 1988; Mayer *et al.*, 1995), its issue lies in the lack of a consensual definition. Over the years differences in trust characterisations have revealed a divergence of definitions. Much of the studies on trust have been centred on the functionalities of trust. Two influential seminal works attempt to illuminate and clarify the trust construct. As a starting point, trust is defined as a psychological state to accept vulnerabilities based on positive expectations (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). The central thrust of this argument suggests that a trustor expects the trustee to behave in a way that is benevolent and in the interest of the relationship. Moving beyond Rousseau *et al.*'s (1998) definition, Mayer *et al.*'s, (1995) integrative model provides another influential definition, as they define trust as the willingness to be vulnerable based on the notion that a task will be performed without any form of monitoring. This definition of trust parallels that of Rousseau *et al.*, (1998) and Gambetta (1998) with respect to vulnerability. Being vulnerable suggests an exposure to the potentiality of losing.

From this, one can clearly derive a degree of convergence as trust involves being vulnerable to risks. It is also important to note that vulnerability is a precondition to trust; as the ‘*willingness to be vulnerable*’ (Mayer *et al.*, 1995) and the ‘*intention to accept vulnerability*’ (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998) reveal the optimistic expectations of the trustor. In Nigeria, the Igbo people (Ọ́dị̀ Ọ́gbò) who primarily inhabit the south-eastern part of Nigeria refer to trust as *ntukwasi obi*. This definition can be loosely translated to mean confidence in someone’s ability or a firm belief in the reliability and ability of a person. These are similar interpretations found in earlier definitions proposed by Mayer *et al.*, (1995), Rousseau *et al.*, (1998), Gambetta, (2000).

Helpful in this perspective, is the broad idea that trust invokes an image of connectedness with norms of morality and personalised relationships embedded within social networks (Lyon, 2000; Omeihe, 2019). The reality is that trust emerges from relationships between two people-bilateral, or multilateral- where trust is developed with people from the same community or group. The preference for transacting with individuals with proven reputation implies that trust is vital in economic action. This becomes very important in environments where parties to a transaction are unwilling to rely on the existing institutional arrangements (Granovetter, 1985; Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Welter, 2012). In this stem, trust removes the need for contracts which are often costly to monitor and enforce (Barney and Hansen, 1994, Dyer and Chu, 2003; Møllering, 2006). As observed by Zaheer *et al.*, (1998) trust reduces the propensity to guard against opportunistic behaviour of the other party. Presumably, this may also explain why Dyer and Chu (2003) found that trust not only reduces transaction costs but also necessitates information sharing and sanctions that create value in network relationships. Evidently, the essence of trust is simple.

With trust, social norms are sustained through a balance of acting reciprocally and the threat of sanctions by the other party (Lyon, 2000; Omeihe, 2019). On one hand, reciprocity signals that both parties to a relationship expect a benevolent disposition which would not undermine the relationship (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998; Welter, 2012). This is predicated on the observance of norms of benevolence and fairness in network relationships (Gulati, 1995; Cummings and Bromiley, 1996; Møllering, 2006). On the other hand, the threat of sanction entails the tall cost of losing trade benefits. Somewhat surprisingly, norm guided behaviour is supported by fear of social sanctions which makes it a duty to obey existing norms. Necessary and sufficient sanctions can include threats to reputation, shaming and exclusion from community or economic activities (Porter and Lyon, 2006; Amoako, 2019; Omeihe *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the attitudinal hallmark of norms includes feelings of embarrassment; guilt and shame at the prospect of violating norms (Elster, 1989). In order words, established sanctioning mechanisms ensure conformity to expected behaviour, as future cooperation will only be possible when members comply with existing norms.

3. Unravelling Networks and social norms

While most scholars accept that social networks play a critical role in entrepreneurship, its broader application provides a useful account for promoting the economies of time (*which is the ability to capitalise on immediate market opportunities*), as members seek to achieve common

goals through connected bonds of affiliation (Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Ghauri *et al.*, 2003). In fact, such bonds provide the lubricant for a structural position to social life. A major precondition for network relationships is the existence of mutual orientation. As Omeihe (2019) reports, that network actors interact based on a set of shared positive expectations. Practically, the simple description of trust as a lubricant for connection underlies the configuration of social networks.

Drawing from Putnam's (1993) insights, participation in networks of interactions invokes norms of reciprocity and supports a culturally defined template for future collaborations. Interestingly, this insight openly supports the view that through previous interactions, information on members' reputation can be collected through links to networks (Lyon, 2000). This aspect of reciprocity of behaviour described as '*union*' by Kronman (1985), implies a reliance on network relations to promote a feeling of oneness. Kronman's analysis of '*union*' is consistent and applicable to the oneness displayed by specific African networks in Chamlee-Wright's (1993) study of indigenous institutions. She pursues her thesis by reporting that West African market associations put sanctions in place for breaking the rules shaping their society. Her study highlights report how threats of ostracisation and indigenous arbitration were recognised as honoured methods used to constrain opportunistic behaviour.

Primarily drawing on norms, Amoako and Matlay (2015) describe social norms as the expectations about behaviour that is considered acceptable and unacceptable. This implies that norms are instructions which direct how to act. However, this very general conceptualisation needs refining. The claim made here goes beyond, as norms are formed within culture through socialisation. Thus leading to the development of predictable responses common to a certain group of people (Heide and John, 1992; Hodgson, 2006). At the same time, norms refer to actions which form the basis for building personal trust (Lyon, 2000). We state that an explanation of the relative importance of norms lies in its reliance to constrain opportunism in one-off transactions, especially where previous interactions are non-existent, and no expectation for possible future transactions.

Perhaps the most distinctive insight of norms is offered by Coleman (1990). The major focus of Coleman's perspective indicates that norms exist when actions are socially held by others rather than an individual actor. This emphasis implies that norms are formed and maintained by self-interested rational individuals involved in voluntary exchanges with each other. This refreshing perspective was countered by Elster (2003) who believes that Coleman's account ignores the role of enforcers who sanction individuals who violate the norm. Elster's perfect riposte implies that norms are internalised by individuals who have the morality to avoid the shame and guilt that comes with being sanctioned. As a result, when norms are violated, sanctions through social consensus are allowed as forms of enforcements. Such sanctions include threats to reputation, shaming and exclusion from community or economic activities (Porter and Lyon, 2006; Brennan and Pettit, 2004; Amoako, 2019). In order words, established attitudes of approval and disapproval ensure conformity to regularity in behaviour.

Advances in the conceptualisation of norms have resulted to the growing appreciation it plays in guiding entrepreneurial behaviour. The perspective of Elster (2003) has been an important catalyst, but the contributions from Amoako and Matlay (2015) and Omeihe (2019) have also aided our understanding of dynamic nature of norms. Their insights reveal that when people comply with existing norms, they do this out of fear of social ostracism. This corpus of academic insight posits that norm guided behaviour is supported by fear of social sanctions which makes it a duty to obey existing norms. However, this study adds that that when norms are internalised, people would comply even when they are not exposed to sanctions.

A key tension is understanding how norms support sound entrepreneurial decisions. It is no wonder that scholars support this view by stating that norm-based network relationships provide market information, trade opportunities and protection against the liability of foreignness (Brunetto and Farr-Wharton, 2007; Rodriguez and Child, 2012; Amoako and Matlay, 2015; Amoako, 2019). Other researchers subscribing to this embedded role reveal that although norms define actions which are deemed right or wrong, they cannot be created at will (Harriss-White, 1996). Consequently, it is convenient to prod, that the emergence of norms is dependent on the context or cultural background of entrepreneurial relationships. This is apposite and consistent with the views of Platteau (1994), as he indicates that the production of norms is based on historically based cultural endowments. Connecting this to the ideas of Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993), reveals that bounded solidarity which leads to the development of principled collective behaviour, provides mutual support for the observance of norms. Based on the foregoing, the empirical component of this study is required to embrace a richer understanding of norms and trust-based networks.

4.Methodology

The empirical component of this study was carried out with agricultural and manufacturing traders operating within the Bokokos and Ero markets of Nigeria. In-depth case studies of the two markets were adopted for a period of 3 months. Selecting the cases was based on a purposive sampling aimed at comparing the perceptions and experiences of respondents especially as it relates to their environment. The selection involved visits to open marketplaces, trade meetings, export forums and trade fairs. The central choice for adopting this approach is due to its ability to reveal the hidden dynamics within unique research settings. The cases were bound by time and activity, which enabled the ability to observe the respondents over a period (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2014). This made it possible to uncover the key themes that shaped the findings of this study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow actors reveal interpretations of their experiences. Interviews were conducted with 30 small-scale traders and the duration ranged from 30 minutes to an hour. Following the advice of Eisenhardt (1989), evidence from each of the cases were compared towards identifying new insights and ensuring a close relationship to the data.

Following Hoogendoorn *et al.*, (2010), we found that the within-case and cross-case synthesis were useful in analysing case study evidence. This technique enabled the analysis of each case while allowing multiple cases to be analysed as part of a single case. The case studies led us to rethink established theories by examining evidence where established theories might refuse to hold (Mitra *et al.*, 2017). Findings from the interviews, observations and documentary evidence were reported using quotes to build specific narratives. The quotes drew on the responses from the traders interviewed for this study, and effort was made to ensure that the responses were not lost in the contexts in which they were made.

By enhancing variability, representative samples which included female traders, the size of their business and history of trading activity were considered. In exploring social norms through trust-based network relationships, open ended questions were important in exploring the influences of social structures on the entrepreneurial decisions. These include issues of trust and how indigenous arrangements impact network relationships. In this matter, the ability to build rapport with the respondents, was useful in capturing their interpretations of trust, as they welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences. The consideration for limiting bias was minimised through ensuring a considerable amount of observing market transactions, documentary analysis and informal discussions. Table one below highlights the profiles of the respondents.

In investigating the influence of social norms shaping trust-based relationships, an open mind was kept about what was needed to be known. Based on this stance, it ensured that the techniques adopted for creating and collecting data were sensitive to the phenomena being studied (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1992). To a large degree, this allowed the emergence of rich and valid findings from the data. Here, the study concentrated largely on methods which emphasised fewer restrictions to the phenomena being studied. Based on this, we followed the advice of Yin (2014) by adopting the highly complementary but sophisticated combination of semi-structured interviews and direct observations as multiple sources of evidence. Interestingly, the major strength of adopting these multiple sources of evidence lay in the development of converging lines of enquiry, which ensured that potential findings were accurate and convincing.

Essentially, the appeal in our methodological approach lies in the adoption of critical incident technique (CIT) for data collection. Its reflective nature unearthed complex issues as the respondents shared their subjective interpretations of trust, networks and social norms (Chell, 2004). Respondents were probed to recount following instances related to the effectiveness of network relationships, trust development and the role of sanctions in trade networks. With regards to choosing the strategy for data analysis, we aimed to adopt a strategy which treated evidence fairly, ruled out alternative interpretations and produced compelling conclusions. In this light, a thematic analysis was the most appropriate as it delivered a structured methodology useful in identifying key themes within the data set (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clark, 2006).

In providing a rich thematic analysis of the data set, key themes were identified, coded and analysed to give an accurate account of the entire data set. Guided by Langley's (1999) advice, a narrative strategy which ensured a detailed analysis of the transcriptions was employed. Issues of potential interests and patterns of meanings were identified within the data. This involved a

constant iteration between the whole data set, extracts of coded data and the analysed data. The whole data set was then systematically analysed, as interesting aspects formed basis of repeated patterns (themes) were identified. Following the initial coding, our long list of codes required sorting into various themes. These were combined to develop an overarching theme through a collection of candidate themes, sub themes and a sense of the individual themes. This was to ensure that data within the themes were meaningful in revealing the richness of the phenomenon being studied.

Table 1. Profile of traders

Case No	Gender	Age	Sector	Educational level
Case 1	Male	28	Agriculture	Islamia
Case 2	Male	35	Manufacturing	Diploma
Case 3	Male	40	Agriculture	Diploma
Case 4	Female	45	Agriculture	Elementary
Case 5	Female	43	Agriculture	Elementary
Case 6	Male	40	Agriculture	Diploma
Case 7	Male	41	Agriculture	Elementary
Case 8	Male	28	Agriculture	Secondary
Case 9	Male	35	Agriculture	Elementary
Case 10	Male	37	Manufacturing	Islamia
Case 11	Male	52	Manufacturing	Diploma
Case 12	Male	30	Manufacturing	Graduate
Case 13	Male	37	Agriculture	Elementary
Case 14	Male	39	Manufacturing	Secondary
Case 15	Male	30	Agriculture	Secondary
Case 16	Male	38	Manufacturing	Secondary
Case 17	Male	38	Manufacturing	Secondary
Case 18	Female	37	Manufacturing	Secondary
Case 19	Male	39	Manufacturing	Secondary
Case 20	Male	46	Agriculture	Primary
Case 21	Male	41	Manufacturing	Graduate
Case 22	Female	30	Agriculture	Secondary
Case 23	Male	43	Sector	Diploma
Case 24	Male	30	Agriculture	Primary
Case 25	Female	35	Manufacturing	Graduate
Case 26	Female	34	Agriculture	Secondary
Case 27	Female	27	Agriculture	Graduate

Case 28	Female	34	Agriculture	Islamia
Case 29	Female	46	Agriculture	Elementary
Case 30	Female	30	Agriculture	Secondary

6. Background to manufacturing and agriculture

It is not difficult to overstate the key role of manufacturing and agriculture within the Nigerian context. The continued reliance on oil has seen the contraction of labour-intensive sectors leading to high rates in unemployment and underemployment (World Bank, 2018). Nigeria's non-oil sector is driven by manufacturing and agriculture. A cursory review of data provides evidence that both sectors account a sizeable share of Nigeria's revenue proceeds. This providing a compelling argument for increased state support for both sectors. With a large population and a middle class that has grown from 13% to 19%, Nigeria is best described as Africa's biggest market. Ultimately, the dominance of local trading and regional economic specialisation is likely to emerge as more institutional support appears to be increasing. Oddly and given a large market like Nigeria, both sectors are expected to contribute beyond 4% on a yearly basis. Helpful as this perspective, is the notion that underdeveloped informal trade still holds the greatest potentials for further development. In this regard, the need to remove pervasive barriers which include the urgent institutional reforms and regional trade improvements could kick start a new wave of trade development.

7. Traders

The structural advantage of trade systems within the selected markets is a high association of potatoes, tomatoes, vegetable dealers in Bokokos. Plastic, beverage, furniture and coal merchants were dominant in the Ero market. Both markets stand out, as the local trader enterprises tend to operate in a world of weak government institutions, an incomplete market with little access to bank credit and poor transportation infrastructure. It is also important to note that a most of the traders (*both male and female*) account for the least educated in the society. Somewhat surprising is the striking high proportion of female traders trading to support their families. Despite the high volume of trade conducted, there was an absence of formal banking institutions. The core of trade activities was financed through alternative arrangements. In fact, formal banking procedures within the markets failed to accommodate the specific needs of the local traders.

The grounded structural disadvantage was a lack of access to financial resources required for growth. With respect to provision of credit, most traders are often denied credit from formal financial institutions as many are unable to provide the required collateral. To realise their purpose, the traders are organised into various crafts, guilds and associations. Notably, there were associations of Irish potato traders, fruit and vegetable associations, herbal medicine dealers and coal traders. These associations highlighted a particular level of social interdependence. This refreshing perspective showed that ties to tribal communities, religious associations and family relationships necessitated a decrease in transaction costs, access to market information and more economic opportunities. The reality revealed that the strength and influence of such associations were manifested in their ability to enhance necessary cooperation by bringing these trader-owned enterprises together.

Evidently, the associations enabled the ability to guard trade secrets, ensured an effective control of outputs and acted as custodians for entry access. Apart from having ties to these associations, many of the traders operated as middlemen to trade transactions. These middlemen were highly competitive and generally efficient channels for the distribution of cash crops and manufactured goods. The perishable nature of the agricultural produce required efficiency on the part of the middlemen in facilitating speedy delivery to consumer markets. And as such they have built a reputation for operating small capital but large turnovers.

Table 2 Functions of exporting trade association

<i>Trade Association</i>	<i>Estimated member size</i>	<i>Functions</i>
Fruit and Vegetable dealers association	34	Sharing market information, providing access to credit, reducing massive exploitation from government officials; conflict resolution, welfare benefits to members; access to new markets; price regulation and sanctioning of members.
All Farmers Association of Nigeria	37	Conflict resolution and mediating in trade disputes; credit and mutual assistance; providing information on members and export markets; control of weekly setting of price; serving as an umbrella body and acting as representatives of farmers at government parleys.
Association of Irish sellers	76	Supporting the transport and delivery of goods; access to new markets; reduce barriers to new markets.
Cocoa Community Association	45	Resolving issues around export trade; intermediaries between government and members; distribution of agro-inputs; provide access to new markets and facilitate information exchange; sanction erring members; provide information about reputation of existing and potential members.
Association of Furniture Makers	43	Promoting networking; assistance and welfare support; information on members' traceability; price setting; sanctions and threats overseen by bales and local chiefs.

8. Findings

8.1 Mechanisms of Trust: *Networks of trade association*

The bulk of trade in the Bokokos and Ero markets occur within the informal sector. This is particularly revealing as Nigerian traders operate in a market characterised by weak formal institutions. It is a moot point that membership to trade networks is one of the most remarkable features of West African trade. Yet even while networks play specific roles, a one constant element is that networks function in parallel to the inefficient features of the dysfunctional formal institutions meant to enhance trade activities. By encouraging connections which provide vital economic support, networks were found to provide trade advisory, as loans were provided to members when they suffer financial difficulties. Additionally, investments activities were financed through indigenous arrangements like the role played by formal banking institutions. Notably, this alternative institutional support system ensured that assistance was provided during child births, marriages and funeral arrangements. This cushion the financial burden meant to be incurred by members. One of the traders-a vegetable dealers, provides insights into the typical support provided by the trade network:

We tax ourselves in the Cucumber Association. This is done every Friday. We gather the funds for emergency or problematic situations involving members of our association. For instance, one might need financial support to buy goods. Then we can apply those funds to support the person. Here, the funds are kept with the treasurer. If the funds are used for a different purpose, the treasurer would be disciplined (Case 9).

Engaging with the traders drew attention to the distinct nature of trust in minimising inefficiencies and reducing transactions costs. In this context, trust removed the need for contracts which were perceived to be costly to monitor and enforce. An important mechanism needed for trust was information about the reputation of other members. Trusting relationships were found to rely on the extent of information about a member's reputation and likely sanctions where a member goes contrary to existing norms. This implies that the information about ones' reputation determined the chance for likely trade interactions. By drawing on previous interactions, associations can provide information about a member's reputation such that potential partners know what to expect. This affirms the notion that the decision to trust is based on the social norms and network ties.

A unique aspect of trade associations is reflected in their ability to exercise regulatory influence. Case 8's response reveals the trade associations' capacity to build trust across its members. In this way, trust is built as members are weary of sanctions which may include reputation damage and ostracisation.

Similarly, a trader who deals in fresh potatoes explains further:

It depends on the gravity of the offence. For example, you can be suspended or even be expelled from the association; and no one will transact business with you in the markets (Case 8).

The above response highlights the role and reach of associations. The observation presented here reflects that associations promoted trust through arbitrations and enforcements. This is particularly pertinent, as trust thrives when confidence exists in other members, especially when there is a possibility to act opportunistically. Thus, the risk of being opportunistic is mitigated by relying on norms of association. Interestingly, the scope and function of trade associations in building trust among its members is also indicated in its ability to create arenas for price settings and by ensuring that such prices were followed. One of the respondents who deals with locally manufactured fabrics demonstrated the specific functions of trade associations:

Our association helps in resolving a lot of issues. It helps in fixing prices of fabrics and enhancing member welfare. It provides information on new markets and information on foreign members. You can't just fix a price by yourself; you must be in the association because everybody comes together to fix a particular price. There is no disadvantage; you just must belong to an association to thrive well
(Case 12).

Case 12's response summarises that trade associations are able to create benefits for its members through cooperative efforts such as 'price fixing'. Specifically, the indication suggests that association represents the interests of its members by acting as a bridge between traders and partners in foreign markets. Interestingly, the strength of shared values is instrumental in fostering trust relationships among members. Thus, trust ensures that members will behave in a way that is expected.

While it is accepted that the trade associations generally have positive benefits, however it was found that they can be used to foster the development of trade cartels, thereby restricting access to markets. Although this may be beneficial to its members, it goes beyond to restrict opportunities for non-members. Secondly, another danger of taking a glamorised stance of such networks lies in the fact that it supports long standing illegal trade. The evidence below shows that evasion of duties may be widespread, and the associations play a role in protecting members from government officials:

We have so much advantage, because sometimes some traders may want to import banned products and if the border official stops or threatens to harass us at the border, we are not bothered. In this case, we just handover the case to our association, who will use their connections in resolving any issues (Case 18).

Indeed, many of the exporters are subjected to harassments from custom and other law enforcement officials at the border. Such harassments include unauthorised market raids, demands for bribes and export permits at toll gates. In these instances, the associations ensure the remittances of *egunje* or *gbelenje*, which are kickbacks and mandatory settlements meant to ensure that government officials turn a blind eye to members. It is normal practice that these kickbacks or settlements would be further passed on to the superiors of the government officials. Thus, the officials become more cooperative due to the gained trust between them and the association.

8.2 Trust Based on Working Relationships

A critical approach for gaining insights into the true meaning of trust, norms and networks was to prompt the respondents to recall key events. Across the traders, the most common response for trusting was the development of long-standing relationships formed through previous interactions. All the traders had developed trust after many years of doing business together. Through such interactions, they were able to build information about the reputation and ability of their partners. For instance, the traders can avail and receive credit facilities from their partners based on information about their reputation. One of the traders who trades in plastics and hair attachments summed up her response as follows:

Surely, we offer credit, but that credit is based on trust since we have been business for many years.

Sometimes, our partners may have some unplanned financial problem and they approach us requesting for credit. We would give them the credit because we know their location and their family.

We also know that they cannot escape with our money (Case 25).

From the above, it is gathered that the provision of credit facility is crucial to facilitating trade exchange. A necessary consideration for giving credit is knowing the home, shop and family of the prospective partner. This is done through conducting visits to the homes of members as a form of safeguard. In addition, traders were able seek the intervention of family members in cases of default. It is hoped that interventions would disgrace the defaulting partner to repayment. Timelines for repayment was often dependent on the strength of the relationship. For instance, credit could be in form of advances for goods, capital injection and gbase (*short to long term loan facilities*). This is particularly important as limited access to capital and banking facilities were identified as primary constraints facing the traders. Indeed, this explains the response of a tomato dealer:

The first and second dealings will enable you get to know the person and their identity will be known.

Credit is important because your customer may not have the capital so you help him, and he will pay you after selling the goods. This is because, market cannot move without credit. Trust is the most

important thing in business. It is because of trust (Case 7).

Interestingly, another observation that applied to all the respondents revealed that trust is built through reciprocity in gestures. This includes attending marriages, naming ceremonies, and funerals. Attendance to marriages or funeral rites was considered the norm as they reflect a sign of utmost respect. Participating in such events automatically transforms relationships to one bonded in fraternal oneness. During these events, members are required to support with monetary gifts enclosed in white envelopes. This reinforces trust obligations as members make effort to reciprocate such gestures.

8.3 Trust and Networks of Transites or Central Men

The essence of the '*transites*' otherwise known as '*central men*' is simple. The '*transites*' or '*central men*' are conceived as actors who deliver rich and specific forms of resources to the traders. Clearly, they play an important role in facilitating the distribution and delivery of goods transported over long distances. For example, they enable the local traders bridge the '*psychic distance*', which refers to the constraints of gaining access to foreign markets. This includes reducing risks and identifying new market opportunities. In obtaining a richer picture, traders were prompted about the role of transites. The picture that emerged revealed that the *transites* ensured that information exchange was secured despite long physical distances. Such information was often relayed without delay across markets.

In view of the respondents' narratives, evidence revealed that most of the traders relied on personalised relationships built on trust in working with the *transites*. Reciprocating trust gestures was very beneficial as transites often acted as guarantors in situations where traders required advanced credit. In acting as guarantors, the unique nature of trust was revealed as the norm involve enforcing sanctions when obligations are not honoured.

Consistent with this, 22 out of the 30 cases maintained that they had built trust based on relationships with transites. Also, all the female traders reported that they enjoyed the benefits of transites. Two respondents shared their views on about the trust they had with their transites.

I don't see the people I supply to. The trade is done by the transites or not done at all (Case 14).

I was introduced to the transites by my contacts. They help us distribute our products. Well, you can call them agents or middlemen, it is all the same. More importantly they help us in our distribution' (Case 27).

In their position, the transites explored differences across local markets and offered favourable destinations for trade partners seeking to expand beyond the country's borders. Each relationship with the transite requires trust and this involves elements of benevolence and reciprocity. The respondents revealed that information about the reputation of the transites came from existing network links. Such information was based on the historical records of reliability and dependability of the transites. Additionally, some of the respondents explained that sanctions exist when transites break trust relationships. Such sanctions may range from shaming, to damaging the personal reputation of the transites and exclusion from potential trade activities. This is consistent with the assertion that reputation usually takes a long time to build, however it can be easily damaged. Thus, knowledge of the transite's reputation plays an important role in entering any form of relationships. Across the markets, information about their trustworthiness is disseminated through quick gossips.

Interestingly, it was observed that government officials also played the roles of transites. In one of the research locations, some of the traders pointed to plain clothed government officials who exploit their roles at the border gates. In their capacity as a part time transites, the officials are usually tasked to deliver goods to trade partners in foreign markets.

This role is considered very important, as goods are not subject to checks by other border officials, thus guaranteeing little or no interference. However, such cooperation can only be achieved after receiving his *egunje* (kickback), thereby gaining his trust.

8.4 Norms and Sanctions in Trust-based Network Relationships

The empirical findings of this study support the notion that trust emerges from sanctions, reputation and norms. When norms are violated, sanctions through social consensus are allowed as forms of enforcements. The trader associations performed quasi-regulatory functions such as encouraging appropriate values and behavioural norms. Sanctions were imposed as penalties meant to govern and regulate individual and collective trader action. These include threats to reputation, shaming and exclusion from community or economic activities. Stealing or other forms of cheating were met with severe sanctions such as membership termination.

In cases where trade disputes arose, the associations were quick to resolve them through the powers of trade leaders otherwise known as '*Chairmen*'. Knowing that a member has defaulted, the association enforces sanctions which include the threat of stopping trade agreements and reputation damage. The danger of reputation damage through bad reports implies that future cooperation will not be attainable. This condition fosters a positive reciprocity of trusting behaviour through where members seek to reduce malfeasance. More generally, this condition holds strength as cooperation is made certain through a balance of acting reciprocally and being forced into action through sanctions.

In view of the experiences of the respondents, the evidence revealed that some of the respondents had relied on the use of threats as more drastic actions. The approach employed invoking traditional curses using *juju* (*black magic*) and in one case threats of shooting. The use of threats was considered in instances where members had gone against established norms, such that trust repair efforts were likely to be fruitful. Arguably, threats of violence were effective in ensuring that defaulting partners fulfilled certain agreements. However this tactic limits chances for future trade relationships.

An observable implication of the above narrative is that such threats encouraged some level of acceptable compromise. However, in extreme cases, victims are likely to ignore the potentials of continued relationships. This becomes complex and makes reconciliatory efforts very difficult. A more intriguing fact is that the invocation of traditional curses through shared religious norms reduces the chances of malfeasance or trust violation. For instance, the use of oaths as sanctioning mechanisms portends great dangers in event of default. Members are warned about incurring the wrath of the traditional deities, as curses maybe invoked as punishment. To demonstrate this, the below statement from one of the traders highlights the activation of oaths:

Yes, yes, if I may remember, one of my partners refused to make his repayments over a couple of years. Our association had to intervene, and we planned to activate the oath which he swore. He finally paid because he feared the repercussions (Case 24).

Such threats were found to be effective in difficult situations where the association has no intention of continuing existing relationships. Further evidence reveal that the activation of oaths is rarely used by the trader associations, except in very difficult scenarios. This is preceded by series of advices, cautions and reminders of the consequences of breaking such oaths.

8.5 Traders' Perception of Social Norms

Many of the traders agree that relationships underpinned by norms enhanced cooperation. In this study, norms refer to actions that are considered acceptable or unacceptable and thus form the basis for building personal trust. Further examination indicates that norms were relied on to constrain opportunism in one-off transaction, especially in situations where previous interactions were non-existent. A more striking evidence within our findings was the overwhelming influence of family/kinship, ethnic and religious ties. The interesting feature is that many aspects of these structures were reinforced by traditions norms. And these are considered very important, more than how it is accorded in western societies. In this matter, the sheer power of solidarity is often demonstrated in the need to build economic relations with members of these networks. In fact, the uniqueness and durability of such economic relations were found to be underpinned by trust.

Specifically, 19 out of the 30 participants relied on cultural norms of family/kinship, ethnic and religious ties in building trust. This is based on the knowledge that family/kinship and ethnic bonds as well as religious beliefs foster trust relationships. Interestingly, 7 out of the 8 women traders indicated that they relied on shared ethnic ties in fostering trade relationships. One of the female traders summed up this narrative below:

Well, most times you do business with people who speak your language. I hope you understand. So if a person comes to me speaking Ibo, my language I will entertain the person, properly than the person that doesn't speak my language, so yeah off course ethnicity plays a big role in business (Case 22).

Along these lines, statements such as '*na my brother*' (loosely translated to mean someone from the same ethnic group) are commonplace. In this way, the traders were bound to trust people who speak their local languages and view them as more trustworthy than others. Evidence also revealed that norms were followed based on cultural institutions of chieftaincy. The traditional chief (referred to as *Bale* or *Onye-isi*) oversee the affairs of the cultural association and ensures that members internalise moral norms by conducting themselves accordingly. Like trade associations, the cultural institutions of chieftaincy play specific functions in dispute resolutions and are responsible in enforcing expected behaviour. However, unlike trade associations, membership to cultural associations tends to be defined by shared cultural heritage, homeland origin or language.

The *Bales* or *Onye-isis* are tasked with settling disputes and making judgements which every member is expected to abide by. Members who choose not to accept the ruling are either ostracised or may not get the council's support in the event of future disputes. In this way, these institutions build trust by sanctioning individuals who go against established norms. Beyond the cultural structures, a significant part of the Nigeria's indigenous structure is founded on religion. Generally, a relative number of traders are traditionalists who believe in ancestral deities. An Igbo coal trader describes the role of traditional beliefs system in building trust:

We only partner with people who have the same belief. That means it will be impossible to cheat us. We make you take the Iyi (oath)... do you understand? The Iyi (oath) and belief in tradition makes the business and relationship stronger (Case 14).

In this matter, trade partners are obliged to draw on religious beliefs of *Iyi* (oath) in promoting trusting relationships. The evidence indicates that traders were bound together by shared religious norms, thus reducing the chances of malfeasance or trust violation. The use of oaths as sanctioning mechanism portends great dangers in event of default.

There was also evidence of how strong Islamic beliefs enforced trust across the traders. In describing this narrative, one of the respondents brings precision to bear on the role of Islamic beliefs in strengthening trade relationship between his partners:

It is very important as you know in our religion (Islam), that we don't cheat people. We don't believe in cheating people. So if I meet a brother that is a Muslim, I do business with him, I know he won't cheat, I will not expect him to cheat me, he too will expect me not to cheat him. So life is simple, it is easy. That doesn't mean I can't do business with other people oh, it is just that I am more comfortable with a Muslim that has the same belief with me (Case 28).

As explained by case 28, religion norms play an important role in encouraging trade with people whom the traders may not know very well. This above excerpt typically explains that shared religious norms would prevent opportunism in one-off encounters.

Despite the enabling influence of normative structures, most of the female cases claimed that they faced discriminations of not being accepted into trade and cultural associations. This deep-seated paradox revealed that female traders were discriminated simply for reasons of gender. Interestingly, this evidence cuts across the ethnic divide, with more preponderance across the Northern female traders. It is not surprising that the indigenous institutions have failed to recognise the immense contributions of women, as sensitivity to the barriers faced by female traders reveal a high level of masculine domination. The underlying norm indicates that women should not be elevated to join men in meetings. This is summed up by one of the female traders:

I am woman and I can't be a member of the association. Women cannot sit and talk when they are discussing. You know it's a man's world. It is our tradition. Women don't talk there and are not mean to be seen there, it is the men that would do it, they would agree and they would come to tell us (Case 25).

Case 25's response reveals the how the contextual implication of religious norms restricts female entrepreneurial development. This is particularly interesting as most African societies are strongly patriarchal in their nature, such that women are often confined to child nurturing and the keeping of the home.

9 Discussion and conclusions

This article has attempted to contribute to the discourse on trust, norms and network relationships within an emerging market economy. The results of the study invoke the importance of understanding how trust is developed in the absence of efficient formal institutional arrangements (*such as law courts and legal structures*) taken for granted in advanced economies. Through our engagements with 30 Nigerian traders and observations of their market activities, this study was able to draw attention to the broader role of personalised and institutional based network relationship in resolving enhancing economic exchange.

Within the remit of the study, we sought to provide trustworthy narratives of how network relationships were culturally specific. Given the plight of the traders, the unique insights cover a range of processes through which trust, norms and network relationships were formed. Across the cases, the multiple narratives revealed a diversity of indigenous institutional types that shaped the entrepreneurial strategy of the respondents. Firstly, the findings confirmed that indigenous institutions, such as ties to cultural, religious and trade associations had evolved to fill the void left by weak formal institutions. It was apparent that such ties were important as respondents relied on such relationships to enhance entrepreneurial opportunities (Child *et al.*, 2002; Amoako & Lyon, 2014). Yet to a good extent, we also found that indigenous trade networks had developed to accommodate the specific needs of the traders. The role of these associations varied in their nature and scope of functions, as inclusion to these associations was determined by religious affiliations, kinship and ethnic ties. The central logic behind these indigenous associations ensured that the decision of members was rooted in trust, as members enjoy fruitful trade opportunities without recourse to formalised agreements. Consequently, members found to be in breach of the associations' values were sanctioned accordingly.

In tracing the influence of middlemen (transites), the traders relied on working relationships to deliver rich and specific forms of resources. The picture that emerged revealed a very effective personalised trust relationship between traders. Thus, by reliance on trust, the traders were able to share complementary interests by binding themselves to stronger relationships.

Reputation was found to be an essential asset as it begins with a recognition that creates a lasting impression. A trader's overall reputation is a function of one's reputation among various stakeholders. This espouses the notion that traders would prefer to deal with individuals with known reputations to prevent risks and uncertainties (Omeihe *et al.*, 2021). It is our understanding that although agreements between the traders (oral and written) were not backed by legal arrangements, they were honoured based on long standing reputation.

This observation differs substantially from instances where agreements are enforced through effective legal structures. Relating our study to literature, we found that the traders had relied considerably on specific norms of personalised trust relationships and indigenous institutions such as kinship, trade associations, ethnic and religious ties to sustain trade cooperation (Lyon and Porter, 2009; Amoako and Matlay, 2015, Amoako, 2018). Norms of culture, trade associations and religion were found to be the most visible as they fostered relationships between the traders.

Taking the narratives further, we registered a significant danger of taking a romanticised view of norms, as it attributes constraints to women enterprise. The study found that despite its enabling influence, most of the female cases claimed that they faced discriminations of entry into trade and cultural associations. This deep-seated paradox reflects the notion that female traders were discriminated simply for reasons of gender. Interestingly, our detailed analysis under this umbrella exposes the contextual dilemma of religious and cultural norms in restricting female entrepreneurial development. The issue here is that most indigenous institutional arrangements within Nigeria do not wholly encourage women participation in trade engagements. In particular, the constraining role of such arrangements demonstrates the patriarchal nature of African societies where women are often confined to child nurturing and the keeping of the home (Omeihe *et al.*, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that the narratives reveal a more compelling preponderance across the Northern female traders. This indicates higher levels of masculine domination across existing social structures.

Paradoxically, while one acknowledges the role of norms and trust-based networks, an understanding that together, they encourage the development of trade cartels is needed. It is also necessary to identify that family attachments and strong cultural loyalties discourages members economically and geographically. Put succinctly, we believe this would hinder economic development.

Our paper provides more first-hand policy implications. In attempting to establish institutions that facilitate trade within Nigeria, government facilitators and donor agencies often look to the western institutions as models. This indeed has been the case within Nigeria and by extension Africa. A weak understanding of Nigeria's socio-cultural influence has led to misplaced interpretations of its indigenous institutions. The truth is these indigenous institutions have evolved to fill the gap which western institutions have not been able to fill. And they are successful when operating within Nigeria's peculiar context. It becomes pertinent to consider the role of specific indigenous institutions when implementing future trade policies and support initiatives.

In shaping regional development, it is also necessary that future policies explore avenues to channel finance to low-income areas that lack access to formal credit arrangements. This is apposite as it would encourage opportunities for improved export trade. Additionally, there may also be a role to consider poorer and excluded networks and the constraints which inhibit their trade activities. We believe this will entail a detailed consideration of a range of demographic factors such as age, income level, occupation, marital status, gender, educational background, religion, ethnicity and family size.

With regards practice, traders operating within Nigeria's informal economy continue to play an important role in regional development, although their activities to a large extent have been largely ignored. By recognising their potential advantage, the forging of trade relationships can be mobilised to boost the regional development. In examining the phenomena shaping this study, our contribution provides rich insights into the role of trust and show how one might undertake researching norms and networks of trade relationships. While we approached this study from qualitative approach, we are not naive to accept that no single method supersedes the other and as such a quantitative approach could also be explored. As reflexive scholars, we have attempted to illustrate the role of indigenous institutions as alternatives to weak formal institutions. In this vein and quite importantly, related studies should avoid gliding over Nigeria's socio-economic context, as this would lead to incorrect assumptions. This may portend challenges for Nigerian and African development.

Future studies may seek to understand traders from West Africa in comparison to those from Northern or Southern Africa. Similarly, related comparisons could consider differences between traders operating in developing markets and those from mature economies. Similar studies may consider replicating this research across ethnic groups within Nigeria. The point to note is that this would provide richer and novel insights. Ultimately, it is expected that the findings reached in this study and possibly from future studies, would provide well founded and valid insights into the role of norms and trust-based networks within Nigeria and other parts of Africa.

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