

THE ROLE OF RIVERINE TRADE IN SHAPING INTERGROUP RELATIONS IN THE NIGER-BENUE CONFLUENCE REGION UP TO 1900

Hadizat Audu Salihu

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies,
Kwara State University, Malete.
08032899669, hadizatsolihu@gmail.com

Abstract

The confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers served as a vital nexus for trade, connecting diverse ethnic groups such as the Nupe, Igala, Ebira, Bassa, Oworo and other ethnic groups in the region. This study explores how riverine trade along the Niger and Benue Rivers shaped intergroup relations in the area before the colonial intervention. The confluence region was a bustling hub of commercial activity, where various ethnic groups engaged in extensive trade, the rivers served as vital transportation corridors, helping the exchange of goods such as salt, craft items, livestock and agricultural products. Using a qualitative research approach which entails the analysis of historical data obtained from primary and secondary sources gathered from books, journals, archival records and interviews, the study revealed that riverine trade became conduits for cultural exchange, the diffusion of religious practices, and intermarriages, which helped in creating strong social and political ties. The fluid movement of goods and people along the rivers strengthened inter-ethnic alliances and promoted cooperation in maintaining trade networks and securing routes. However, competition over control of strategic trade points occasionally led to tensions and conflicts as key riverine settlements became centres of power, and groups that controlled these areas often dominated regional trade, leading to rivalries over access and influence. Despite these challenges, riverine trade generally acted as a stabilizing force, balancing economic interests with social relationships. The findings underscore the importance of trade as a

catalyst for intergroup relations, shaping the political and social dynamics of the region before 1900.

Key words: Confluence region, Intergroup relations, Pre-colonial, Niger-Benue Rivers and Trade

Introduction

The area where the Niger and Benue Rivers meet, in present-day Nigeria, has always been very important for its history and geography. These two big rivers, which are some of the most important in West Africa, come together in this spot, making it a key place for trade, culture, and relationships between different groups before the time of European colonization (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955). The meeting point of the rivers made it a central business place, acting like a natural road for moving goods and people. In the past, the Niger and Benue rivers helped trade not just between nearby groups but also with faraway places. Important items traded were salt, animals, handmade goods, and farm products (Salihu, 2024). Groups like the Nupe, Igala, Ebira, Egbirakoto, Bassa Nge, Bassa Komo and Oworo lived in this area and did well because of the busy trade happening there (Nadel, 1942). These networks became instrumental in shaping social, economic, and political relations in the region long before the intervention of European colonialism.

The Niger and Benue Rivers were more than just economic lifelines; they were vital cultural connectors that intertwined the diverse ethnic groups of the region. Riverine settlements grew into bustling commercial hubs where goods, ideas, languages, and religious practices were exchanged (Pedraza, 1960). Trade routes served as conduits for the spread of Islam from northern Nigeria, while traditional religious beliefs also travelled far and wide via these rivers (Hunwick, 1992). The rivers thus became a shared resource, fostering mutual economic dependence and social cooperation among various groups. This economic interdependence led to the formation of social

and political ties, as well as instances of cultural synthesis through practices such as intermarriage. At the same time, competition for control over strategic trade points occasionally resulted in conflict, highlighting the dual nature of trade in fostering unity and rivalry among ethnic groups (Salihu, 2024).

In this region, riverine trade was particularly significant, as major rivers like the Niger and Benue served as natural highways linking inland areas to coastal markets and more distant trading regions. The movement of goods, people, and ideas along these rivers helped create intricate trade networks that contributed to the development of political alliances and confederacies (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955). The Niger-Benue confluence region saw a close connection between trade and political power, with control over key riverine trade routes often determining the balance of power among competing ethnic groups. This interlinkage between economic interests and political organization demonstrates how riverine trade functioned both as a unifying force and as a source of competition (Nadel, 1942).

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing the analysis of historical data gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The study draws on historical texts, archival records, journals, and oral traditions to reconstruct the complex interactions that took place in the Niger-Benue confluence region before 1900. Primary sources, such as historical documents and accounts, provide crucial insights into the region's political and economic history (Obafemi, 1980). Oral traditions from the various ethnic groups in the region, as well as interviews with historians and custodians of cultural knowledge, supplement these records by offering a deeper understanding of how riverine trade shaped social structures and intergroup relations (Isichei, and Isichei,1984). Together, these sources allow for a comprehensive examination of the role that riverine trade played in fostering both cooperation and competition among the groups of the Niger-Benue confluence.

This paper argues that riverine trade in the Niger-Benue confluence region before 1900 acted as a powerful catalyst for both cooperation and competition among ethnic groups. Trade fostered economic interdependence, promoted cultural exchanges, and contributed to the formation of political alliances. However, it also led to rivalry and conflict over control of strategic riverine settlements. Ultimately, the fluid movement of goods and people along the Niger and Benue rivers was a central factor in shaping the social, political, and economic dynamics of the region, emphasizing the dual nature of trade as both a unifying and divisive force.

The Physical Geography of the Niger-Benue Confluence Region

The Niger-Benue confluence region is one of the most geographically significant areas in West Africa, characterized by the meeting of the two largest rivers in the region: the Niger and the Benue. The Niger River, one of Africa's longest rivers, originates in the Fouta Djallon highlands of Guinea, flowing over 4,180 kilometres before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean through the Niger Delta. The Benue River, originating in the highlands of Cameroon, serves as its major tributary, joining the Niger at the confluence near present-day Lokoja, Nigeria (Obafemi, 1980). Long before modern road networks, these rivers provided natural transportation corridors, enabling the movement of goods, people, and ideas across vast distances.

The confluence itself created a strategic location for trade and settlement. It served as a natural junction where goods from upstream and downstream could be gathered, redistributed, or transported further afield, connecting different regions of West Africa (Pedraza, 1960). The wide, navigable stretches of the Niger and Benue rivers facilitated year-round trade and communication, even during periods when land routes were impassable due to heavy rains or conflict. As a result, several key settlements emerged along these rivers, including the city of Lokoja at the confluence point, which later played a central role in both pre-colonial and colonial trade (Isichei,

and Isichei, 1984). Lokoja and other riverine settlements like Idah (Igala territory), and Jebba (Nupe territory) became bustling trade centres that attracted merchants, traders, and political leaders from various parts of West Africa. These settlements, strategically positioned along the rivers, not only served as economic hubs but also became political and military strongholds due to their control over lucrative riverine routes.

The Niger-Benue Rivers thus functioned as vital arteries for the flow of goods and facilitated the economic prosperity of the region. However, their importance went beyond trade: they also acted as conduits for cultural and religious exchange, and their banks became centres of social interaction (Haruna, 2011). The strategic significance of these settlements was not limited to their economic value; they also influenced the rise and fall of local political powers, as control over riverine trade routes often determined the political dominance of various ethnic groups in the region (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955).

Ethnic Groups and Settlements in the Confluence Region

The Niger-Benue confluence region is home to a rich tapestry of ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, cultures, and social structures. Among the most prominent groups in this region are the Nupe, Igala, Ebira, Egbira Koto, Bassa Nge, Bassa Komo, and Oworo peoples, all of whom contributed to the cultural and political landscape shaped by the rivers (Pedraza, 1960). These groups traditionally relied on agriculture, fishing, and trade as their primary economic activities, with riverine settlements playing a central role in their social and political organization.

The Nupe people, for instance, occupied the floodplains of the Niger River and developed sophisticated agricultural techniques suited to the region's fertile soils. They also became renowned for their craft industries, particularly brass and glassware, which were highly valued trade items throughout West Africa. The capital of the Nupe Kingdom, Bida, although located inland, relied heavily on its riverine

settlements along the Niger to facilitate trade and communication with other regions (Nadel, 1942). Similarly, the Igala Kingdom centred in Idah on the banks of the Niger River, wielded significant influence in the region. The Igala people's control of Idah, a major trading post, allowed them to dominate trade routes that stretched across the confluence region. The kingdom's wealth and political power were directly tied to its strategic position on the Niger, from where it could monitor and tax goods moving along the river (Boston, 1968).

The Ebiraland and Egbira Koto people, inhabiting areas around the Niger and Benue rivers, also relied on riverine trade and agriculture. Their settlements, such as the towns of Okene and Koton Karfe benefited from their proximity to the confluence. Similarly, the Bassa people, who lived in smaller settlements along the Benue River, engaged in fishing and farming, but also participated in regional trade, leveraging their position along the river to interact with larger neighbouring communities (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955). The Oworo, group occupied the Lokoja area and was strategically located at the confluence itself, giving them direct access to the vital trade routes of both the Niger and Benue rivers. This location allowed them to act as intermediaries in trade between Northern and Southern Nigeria, further embedding their importance in the region's economic network.

Each ethnic group's riverine settlements not only served as economic centres but also played a crucial role in the political landscape of the confluence region. Control over these settlements often meant control over regional trade, and as such, they were highly contested. Political power in these societies was frequently tied to the ability to regulate and protect trade routes along the rivers and manage relationships with neighbouring groups (Obafemi, 1980).

Historical Overview of Trade before 1900

Trade in the Niger-Benue confluence region evolved over centuries, with riverine trade serving as the primary means of economic interaction between different ethnic groups. The region's strategic location at the meeting point of the Niger and Benue rivers made it a key trading hub in West Africa, linking inland areas with coastal markets and connecting distant regions such as the Sahara and the Gulf of Guinea (Meillassoux, 1971). This made the confluence region a crucial part of the trans-Saharan trade routes, through which goods like salt, textiles, and livestock were exchanged.

Before 1900, the most traded goods in the region included agricultural products, craft items, and livestock. **Salt** is one of the most valuable and widely traded commodities in the confluence region exchanged for agricultural produce and crafts made by the Nupe, Igala, and other groups. Sourced from the northern salt mines and the salt pans of the Sahara, salt was an essential item for preserving food and for daily consumption, particularly in regions where local sources of salt were scarce. Salt was often transported in large quantities along the rivers, and control of salt trade routes conferred significant economic power on groups that could dominate its trade (Meillassoux, 1971).

Craft items were another major component of trade in the confluence region, with the Nupe people becoming known for their expertise in metalwork, weaving, and glassmaking. Nupe brassware and glass beads were highly prized in markets across West Africa and were often used as currency in trade transactions (Haruna, 2011). These items were not only symbols of wealth but also functioned as cultural artefacts that reflected the artistic and technical skills of the Nupe craftsmen (Nadel, 1942). Glass beads, for example, were used in religious rituals, as adornments, and even in political ceremonies, further increasing their value.

The **livestock trade** was central to the region's economy, with cattle being the most important animal traded along the rivers. Cattle, particularly from the northern Hausa and Fulani herders, were transported along the Niger and Benue rivers to be sold in markets like Lokoja and Idah. Livestock not only provided a source of food but also played a critical role in agricultural production, as cattle were used for ploughing fields and transporting goods (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955). The demand for cattle in the southern regions, where large-scale herding was less common due to tsetse fly infestations, created a lucrative market for northern traders.

Agricultural products such as yams, millet, sorghum, palm produce, and rice formed the backbone of the local economy. These crops were grown in the fertile floodplains of the Niger and Benue rivers and were essential for both subsistence and trade. Surplus agricultural products were exchanged for salt, livestock, and craft goods, ensuring food security for riverine communities and providing them with access to other essential commodities (Isichei, and Isichei, 1984). The rivers played a key role in facilitating the movement of these bulky and perishable goods to distant markets.

The **palm oil** trade also became increasingly significant in the 19th century, particularly as European demand for palm oil grew in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Palm oil, harvested from the southern regions, was transported along the rivers and exchanged for European goods, firearms, and other items. The growth of the palm oil trade further integrated the Niger-Benue confluence region into global trade networks, especially in the Igala Land where palm trees grew in abundance (Salihu, 2024).

In addition to these major commodities, a wide variety of **other goods** were traded along the rivers, including kola nuts, textiles, pottery, and fishing products. The economic value of these goods varied depending on their rarity, the distance they travelled, and the demand in particular markets. For example, kola nuts from the

southern forests were highly prized in the markets at Lokoja, Idah, Mozum and Ajaokuta, where they were used as stimulants and in social and religious ceremonies (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955). Textiles, particularly those produced by the Ebira, Igala and Oworo people in various weaving centres, were also valuable trade items, with both practical and symbolic uses in the region's social life.

The trade networks that developed in the Niger-Benue confluence region were not only economic systems but also fostered interdependence and cooperation between ethnic groups. Riverine trade created opportunities for interaction and exchange, promoting long-standing trade agreements and alliances that transcended ethnic boundaries.

The necessity of cooperation was most evident in the management of trade routes and markets. For trade to flourish, ethnic groups had to ensure the safety and reliability of transportation along the rivers. This often required collaboration between groups to protect traders from banditry, maintain the navigability of the rivers, and provide security in the marketplaces. For example, the Nupe and Igala peoples, despite their occasional political conflicts, maintained strong trade relations, particularly in the exchange of agricultural products and craft goods (Nadel, 1942). Their economic interdependence helped to mitigate tensions and promote stability in the region. In some cases, trade partnerships were formalized through intermarriage or political alliances, which further strengthened economic ties between groups. Intermarriage between the Nupe and Igala elites, for example, was a common practice aimed at solidifying trade relationships and ensuring mutual economic benefit (Boston, 1968). These marriages helped to create social bonds that reinforced economic cooperation, as the families involved in trade were more likely to trust one another and engage in long-term partnerships.

Another example of economic cooperation can be seen in the collaboration between the Northern Hausa traders and southern riverine groups such as the Oworo. The Hausa, who were dominant in the trans-Saharan trade, relied on southern groups to facilitate the transport of their goods along the Niger and Benue rivers. In return, the southern traders gained access to northern goods like salt, textiles, and livestock, which were essential to their local economies (Obafemi, 1980). These trade relationships were built on mutual benefit, with each group playing a crucial role in ensuring the smooth flow of goods along the riverine routes.

Despite the competition that occasionally arose over control of key trade routes and markets, trade networks in the Niger-Benue confluence region were generally characterized by a high degree of cooperation. The economic interdependence fostered by riverine trade encouraged groups to work together, even in the face of political rivalries. For example, while the Nupe and Igala often competed for dominance over the region, their trade relations remained strong, as both groups understood the importance of maintaining stable and reliable access to the markets along the rivers (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955).

Successful trade partnerships often endured for generations, contributing to the long-term stability of the region's economy.

Intergroup Relations Fostered by Trade in the Niger-Benue Confluence Region

The riverine trade in the Niger-Benue confluence region before 1900 not only stimulated economic activities but also served as a conduit for extensive cultural exchange and social interaction among the diverse ethnic groups. Trade facilitated the movement of people, ideas, and cultural practices, leading to significant cultural diffusion, religious exchange, and the forging of inter-ethnic family ties through marriage alliances.

The Niger and Benue rivers, as the lifeblood of trade in the region, played a central role in the diffusion of cultural practices by the ethnic groups inhabiting the confluence. Trade facilitated the exchange of goods, but it also enabled the sharing of cultural knowledge, language, and customs. As traders from different regions and ethnic groups regularly interacted in bustling markets like Lokoja and Idah, they inevitably influenced each other's way of life, creating a rich tapestry of cultural exchange (Haruna, 2011).

One of the most visible manifestations of cultural diffusion through trade was in clothing styles. The Nupe, Igala, and other groups adopted elements of one another's clothing, especially as they encountered traders from the northern parts of Nigeria and beyond. For example, the introduction of finely woven textiles from the Hausa and Fulani traders, particularly embroidered gowns (known as *babbanriga*) and turbans, became popular attire among the elites of the Nupe and Igala communities (Isichei, and Isichei, 1984). These northern garments, often made from cotton or wool, were not only practical for the local climate but also signalled wealth and status. Over time, these clothing items became integrated into local fashion, blending with traditional dress to create new styles.

Trade also influenced cuisine as different ethnic groups exchanged not only agricultural products but also cooking techniques and ingredients. For example, northern traders brought grains like millet and sorghum, which became staples in the region's diets, while traders from the confluence region supplied kola nuts and palm oil to the north. These exchanges expanded the dietary repertoire of the region's inhabitants, leading to the blending of culinary traditions (Meillassoux, 1971). Riverine communities were known for their reliance on fish as a dietary staple, and the variety of cooking methods such as grilling, drying, and stewing, spread along the trade routes, influencing food preparation styles throughout the region.

In addition to clothing and cuisine, artistic expressions were also shaped by the cultural interactions fostered by trade. The Nupe

people, renowned for their metalwork and glassmaking, incorporated artistic motifs from neighbouring groups, particularly those from the Hausa and Yoruba regions. Glass beads, which were an important item of trade, carried symbolic meanings in religious and social contexts, and their designs often reflected the aesthetic influences of distant trading partners (Nadel, 1942). Similarly, pottery, textiles, and other crafts traded along the rivers showed the integration of diverse artistic traditions, as traders and artisans from different ethnic groups adopted and adapted new techniques and styles.

Language was another key area of cultural diffusion and aspect of intergroup relations. The frequent interactions between traders from different linguistic backgrounds led to the development of multilingualism in many communities along the Niger and Benue rivers. Traders needed to communicate with one another to negotiate prices and discuss goods, and this necessity led to the adoption of common languages, such as Hausa, which became a lingua franca for trade across much of northern Nigeria (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955). While ethnic groups retained their languages, the widespread use of Hausa and other trade languages facilitated communication and strengthened social bonds among traders and communities.

One of the most profound social consequences of trade in the Niger-Benue confluence region was the increase in inter-ethnic marriages and the formation of marriage alliances between different groups. Trade not only facilitated the exchange of goods but also created opportunities for social and political alliances through marriage, which helped to strengthen economic relations and ensure long-term partnerships between ethnic groups.

Marriage alliances were often used as a strategic tool to solidify trade relations. For example, a Nupe trader might marry the daughter of an Igala chief to ensure that his trading rights were protected in Igala territory. These marriages were mutually beneficial, as they tied the

families of traders and political leaders together in bonds of kinship, making it less likely that conflicts would arise over trade disputes (Boston, 1968). Such alliances also facilitated smoother negotiations in the marketplace, as family ties created a sense of trust and cooperation between trading partners. In addition to economic motivations, inter-ethnic marriages helped to forge political alliances. As rulers of key riverine settlements, women from neighbouring ethnic groups were often married to strengthen their political influence and create a network of allies. For example, the Igala and Nupe elites frequently intermarried, creating dynastic connections that helped to stabilize relations between their respective kingdoms (Nadel, 1942). These political marriages also had economic implications, as they often facilitated access to important trade routes and resources.

Inter-ethnic marriages also contributed to cultural blending and the development of hybrid identities. The children of these unions often grew up speaking multiple languages and were familiar with the customs of both their parents' ethnic groups. This cultural fluidity helped to break down ethnic divisions and foster a sense of shared identity among the trading communities of the confluence region (Meillassoux, 1971). Over time, these intermarriages created a cosmopolitan society in the major trading centres, where diverse cultural influences were celebrated and integrated into everyday life.

In the marketplace, traders and their families often formed close bonds with members of other ethnic groups, leading to informal marriages and unions between individuals from different backgrounds. These relationships helped to knit the region's diverse communities together, creating a social fabric that was rooted in both economic and personal connections (Forde, Brown, and Armstrong, 1955).

Conclusion

The exploration of riverine trade in the Niger-Benue confluence region before 1900 reveals its profound influence on intergroup relations among the diverse ethnic communities inhabiting this area. Through the lens of commerce, this study has illuminated how trade facilitated not only the exchange of goods but also the exchange of cultural practices, social ties, and political alliances. Ultimately, riverine trade acted as a catalyst for both cooperation and competition, shaping the socio-economic and political landscape of the region in complex ways.

The riverine trade networks established along the Niger and Benue rivers fostered extensive interactions among various ethnic groups, including the Nupe, Igala, Ebira, Bassa, and Oworo (Haruna, 2011). These interactions were characterized by both collaborative endeavours and competitive rivalries. Trade became an essential means of economic survival, enabling groups to engage in the exchange of vital goods such as salt, agricultural products, and crafts. The fluid movement of goods and people along these rivers strengthened inter-ethnic alliances and encouraged cooperation in maintaining trade networks and securing transportation routes.

As trade flourished, it also acted as a vehicle for cultural exchange, leading to the diffusion of customs, religious practices, and intermarriages among the diverse communities. The socio-economic fabric of the region became increasingly intertwined, with trade fostering a sense of interdependence that outweighed the potential for conflict. However, the competition for control over strategic trade routes and resources occasionally led to tensions and conflicts, highlighting the dual nature of trade as both a stabilizing force and a source of rivalry.

The arrival of European traders in the 19th century introduced new dynamics that disrupted established trade practices. The introduction of firearms and European goods altered local economies,

exacerbating existing tensions and leading to shifts in power among ethnic groups. Colonial interference further complicated these relations, as European powers imposed new governance structures and regulations that undermined traditional authority systems and disrupted established trade networks (Amihere, 2011). These changes laid the groundwork for lasting impacts on intergroup relations in the region.

The legacy of the pre-colonial trade practices and relationships developed along the Niger and Benue rivers continues to influence the region today. Many of the trade routes established during this period remain vital corridors for economic activity, connecting communities and facilitating the movement of goods across the region. The interethnic alliances that were forged through trade have also left enduring social ties, contributing to a sense of shared identity among the diverse ethnic groups in the Niger-Benue confluence area.

Furthermore, the economic interdependence fostered by pre-colonial trade has echoes in contemporary trade practices, where local economies often rely on cross-border trade and regional partnerships (Falola, and Heaton, 2008). The historical interactions and relationships established through trade continue to shape the dynamics of conflict and cooperation among communities in the region, illustrating how historical legacies inform modern socio-economic realities. However, the disruptions caused by colonialism have also left a lasting imprint. The fragmentation of communities and the imposition of new governance structures led to rivalries that persist in various forms today. Understanding these historical dynamics is essential for addressing contemporary challenges, as the region grapples with issues related to resource management, governance, and intergroup relations.

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