NAVIGATING POWER: THE ROLE OF INLAND WATERWAYS IN IGALA-NUPE DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN PRECOLONIAL CENTRAL NIGERIA UP TO 1900

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Abstract

Research Problem: *While scholars of the pre-colonial Niger-Benue Confluence Area have acknowledged its political economy and socio-cultural aspects, the specific role of inland waterways as a critical engine for formal and informal diplomacy has not received adequate scholarly attention.*
Methods: *This study employs a historical methodology, drawing evidence from both primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the diplomatic*

landscape.
***Results**: The research reveals that the Niger-Benue confluence served as a strategic hub where the Igala, Nupe, and other groups utilised waterways for communication, trade, and cultural exchange. Local leaders actively engaged in waterways diplomacy to maintain peace, resolve conflicts, and foster economic cooperation. This complex network of diplomatic relations, though influenced by external factors like trans-Saharan trade and early European contact, was fundamental in shaping regional power dynamics, ensuring peaceful coexistence, and driving economic development.*
***Conclusion**: The study concludes that inland waterways were not merely geographical features but vital channels for diplomatic interaction, which were central to the political stability and economic integration of the pre-colonial confluence area.*
***Key Contribution to Knowledge**: This work explicitly bridges a historiographical gap by systematically demonstrating that waterways diplomacy was a foundational, rather than incidental, component of intergroup and interstate relations in the region.*
***Recommendation**: Future research should further investigate the specific protocols and symbolic communications embedded in this waterways diplomacy to deepen our understanding of pre-colonial African international relations systems.*

Introduction

The historiography of pre-colonial West Africa has long been constructed upon a foundation of terrestrial power. Scholarly narratives, pivotal to our understanding of regional statecraft and inter-polity relations, have been dominantly shaped by the study of expansive land empires, their cavalry, caravan routes, and fortified cities. Works focusing on the administrative sophistication of the Benin Kingdom, the military reach of the Oyo Empire, and the theocratic expanse of the Sokoto Caliphate have, quite rightly, established a paradigm of centralised authority and Saharan or Atlantic-facing exchange. This literature, exemplified by the contributions of scholars like Robin Law and Paul Lovejoy on trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic systems, has provided an indispensable macro-framework.[i] However, its very strength, its focus on the large-scale and the ostensibly centralised, has inadvertently cast a shadow over alternative theatres of power and diplomacy, particularly those shaped by hydrology rather than arid trade winds. It is within this scholarly terrain that the Niger-Benue confluence region, for all its obvious geographical significance, has persisted as a nuanced periphery, its history often fragmented

[i]Robin Law, "The Oyo Empire, c.1600-c.1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

and subsumed within broader narratives that fail to capture the unique fluidity of its political life.

A secondary, more localised pyramid of literature has emerged to address the specific histories of the region's major polities. Pioneering works by historians such as Michael Mason on the Nupe Kingdom and J.S. Boston on Igala society have crucially moved the focus inland, providing detailed accounts of political structures, economic bases, and dynastic histories.[ii] Yet, even within these vital interventions, a persistent terrestrial bias remains. Mason's analysis of Nupe expansion, for instance, often foregrounds cavalry and land campaigns, while examinations of Igala power typically centre on the Idah metropolis and its hinterland relations. The rivers themselves, the Niger, the Benue, and their myriad tributaries, appear in these accounts predominantly as static backdrops or simple conduits for trade, rather than as active, dynamic protagonists in the diplomatic drama. They are setting, not character. This creates a critical gap: while we understand the fact of Igala-Nupe interaction, we lack a sophisticated framework for understanding the distinctive process and medium of that interaction. The literature tells us of conflicts and alliances but seldom interrogates the specific, water-forged mechanisms, the seasonal rhythms, the choke-point control, the shared ritual management of resources that defined how these relations were negotiated, maintained, and broken.

It is precisely at the confluence of these two historiographical currents, the macro-terrestrial and the micro-political, that this study positions itself, not to extend either tradition but to critique and fundamentally reinterpret their shared assumptions by introducing a new, aqueous dimension. This paper argues that to truly navigate the power dynamics between the Igala and Nupe states up to 1900, one must literally navigate their waterways. It posits that diplomacy in this region was not merely conducted across a riverine landscape, but was fundamentally constituted through it. The thrust of this inquiry, therefore, is premised on the gap between the documented outcomes of inter-group relations and the unexamined environmentally-embedded practices that made them possible. By engaging with a more specialised corpus of scholarship, including J.F. Ade Ajayi's insights on rivers as venues for socio-political interaction, and drawing from riverine studies in other contexts like the Niger Delta and the Lower Senegal region, this research reimagines the confluence as a diplomatic arena.[iii]

The originality of this paper lies in its deliberate shift from a historiography of states to a hydrology of statecraft. It contends that the seasonal flux of the rivers dictated the calendar of diplomacy; that control of strategic ports and fishing grounds was a more potent bargaining chip than distant territorial claims; and that those treaties were as likely to be sealed with shared rites over water deities as with exchanges of gifts on land. This is not merely an additive study. It is a call for a new analytical lens, one that sees the canoe fleet as a diplomatic corps, the flooded plain as a contested common, and

[ii] Michael Mason, *Foundations of the Bida Kingdom* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1981); J.S. Boston, *The Igala Kingdom* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1968), 112-130

[iii] Robert A. Hess, J. F. Ade Ajayi and the New Historiography in West Africa, African Studies Review: Vol. 14, No. 2, pp 1–4 (Sep. 1971)

the river junction as a negotiating table. By foregrounding the inland waterways as the central nervous system of Igala-Nupe relations, this paper moves beyond the well-charted topography of land empires to reveal the fluid, adaptive, and deeply geographical nature of power in pre-colonial Central Nigeria. In doing so, it seeks not only to illuminate a specific historical relationship but also to propose a more comprehensive scholarly disposition for understanding African societies, one that fully integrates the profound agency of aquatic environments in shaping human political endeavour.

Research problem

This paper examines the analytical neglect of inland waterways in the historiography of precolonial central Nigeria. Although the political, military, and economic interactions between the Igala and Nupe polities are extensively recorded, the Niger-Benue River system is primarily regarded as a passive backdrop, serving just as a neutral conduit for trade and conflict, rather than as an active geopolitical entity.

This terrestrial bias engenders a significant disparity. It conceals the influence of riverine geography on diplomatic procedures, power projection, and sovereignty. Fundamental enquiries persist without resolution: In what manner did dominance over confluences or seasonal inundations provide diplomatic advantage? How did hydrological cycles influence the time and nature of embassies, tribute, or conflict?Consequently, this study refocuses the examination on the fluvial environment. The text contends that a systematic examination of waterways as dynamic political entities is crucial for a sophisticated, materially informed comprehension of Igala-Nupe governance, advocating for a more ecologically sensitive interpretation of precolonial power dynamics.

Research Objective

To examine the influence of the River Niger and River Benue, along with their tributaries, on the strategic necessities, security strategies, and territorial claims of the Igala and Nupe Kingdoms before 1900. It examines how hydrological management influenced military logistics, economic stability, and the boundaries of political power, thereby defining the riverine basis of their relationship

To analyse these inland waterways as dynamic instruments of diplomacy, investigating their role as channels for conflict, negotiation, and asymmetric power dynamics. This purpose transcends a static geographical perspective by conceptualising rivers as dynamic diplomatic tools that fostered alliances, defined domains of influence, and represented contested resources, thereby illuminating the negotiated essence of power in a riparian context.

Research Methodology

This study utilises an empirical, historical-analytical methodology to investigate the impact of the Niger-Benue riverine system on Igala-Nupe diplomatic relations up to 1900. The historical population includes all existing archival papers, oral histories, early ethnographic studies, and archaeological data regarding precolonial interactions among these populations.

Data were obtained by a purposeful, multi-stage sampling method. The source base was categorised into four distinct groups: (1) British colonial records (1890-1900); (2) narratives from missionaries and explorers (1850-1890); (3) methodically gathered oral traditions from Igala and Nupe custodians; and (4)

archaeological studies of riverine villages. Critical case sampling within each stratum resulted in a final corpus of 31 source units, a quantity established by theme saturation.

The analysis was conducted using source triangulation and theme content analysis. Data regarding river-based interactions, including canoe diplomacy, blockades, tribute, and treaties, was gathered and cross-referenced across many sources to formulate a cohesive study of how waterways facilitated political power and diplomatic procedure

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a reconceptualisation of core terms to advance an environmentally attuned analysis of precolonial statecraft.Fluvial Agency and the Navigation of Power: Challenging orthodox historiography that equates power with territorial control (e.g., Law on Oyo, Iliffe on agriculture), this paper introduces the concept of fluvial agency. Power was not only exercised over land but also through waterways. To "navigate power" is to recognise its dual physical and strategic dimensions: the control of currents, canoe technology, and riverine access points was as critical as governing farmland. The Niger-Benue system was thus an active political domain, not a passive boundary.

Waterways as Diplomatic Landscapes: Moving beyond their established role as "arteries of trade",[iv] this analysis frames inland waterways as diplomatic landscapes. Informed by Harley's work on cultural landscapes, it contends that the physical and seasonal properties of rivers, flood regimes, confluences, and islandsdirectly structured diplomatic possibilities.[v] These dynamic topographies enabled, constrained, and scripted interactions, shifting from buffer zones to negotiation sites with the hydrological cycle.

Diplomacy as Continuous Transaction: Countering narratives that catalogue Igala-Nupe relations as episodic conflict,[vi] this study reconceives diplomacy as a system of continuous transaction. Aligning with Kopytoff's frontier thesis, it posits a complex, ongoing exchange encompassing material tribute, human capital (hostages, royal consorts, specialists), and knowledge (hydrological intelligence, third-party movements).[vii] Within

[iv]K. O. Dike, "Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria" Oxford: Clarendon Press, (1956).

[v]J. B. Harley, "Maps, Knowledge, and Power," in "The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments", ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1988), pp. 277–312.

[vi]Michael Mason, "The Jihad in the South: An Outline of the Nineteenth Century Nupe Hegemony in North-Eastern Yorubaland," Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria" 7, no. 2 (1974): 193–208.

[vii] Igor Kopytoff's, "Mapping spheres of exchange: a multidimensional approach to commoditization and singularization. "Springer Nature Link, Journal."Theory/Conceptual. Published: 26 April 2021Volume 11, pages 81–95, (2021)

this system, a raid functioned as a calibrated diplomatic signal within a perpetual negotiation.

The Fluviopolitical Zone: To analyse the period "up to 1900" requires de-centring the subsequent colonial spatial logic of fixed land borders. This paper conceptualises the region as a fluviopolitical zone, a network where political influence radiated from riverbanks and ports, diminishing with distance from navigable water. This construct, resonant with yet distinct from White's "middle ground," recenters the indigenous spatial logic eroded by British administration, framing Igala and Nupe as adaptive riverine states managing a shared hydraulic environment.

Toward a Theory of Fluvial Geopolitics: Synthesising these concepts, the paper proposes "fluvial geopolitics" as an analytical framework. It argues that in riverine Africa, strategic calculation, diplomatic advantage, and sovereignty were fundamentally intertwined with hydraulic control. This moves analysis beyond the tropes of "trade and conflict" to reveal how geography actively scripted political relations. In this reading, the river itself emerges as the primary mediator and a force to be harnessed in the quest for preeminence.

Theoretical Framework

Hydro-Politics and Diplomatic History, Concepts of "hydroarchy

This paper, "Navigating Power: The Role of Inland Waterways in Igala-Nupe Diplomatic Relations in Precolonial Central Nigeria Up to 1900," positions itself as a deliberate corrective within African historiography. Its intervention is not merely empirical but deeply theoretical, leveraging a synthesised framework of "hydroarchy" (inspired by Pierre Clastres) and "aquatic territoriality" (from Richard White) to challenge a persistent terrestrial bias and offer a novel reading of statecraft at the Niger-Benue confluence.

The core theoretical innovation lies in how it applies these concepts, moving them from descriptive labels to analytical engines that actively reinterpret evidence long marginalised or misread by earlier scholars. Previous related work, exemplified by historians such as Elizabeth Isichei and Robin Horton, as well as specialists like Paul Lovejoy and David Northrup, consistently treated the region's vast riverine networks as a backdrop, as inert, passive conduits for the "real" history of trade and terrestrial empire-building. Waterways were the stage, not an actor; their liquidity was a logistical feature, not a political one. In this established view, power flowed over water, but was not constituted by it.

This paper fundamentally rejects that prepositional logic. By applying Clastres' concept of "hydroarchy", understood not just as rule over water. Still, as a socio-political order structured through aquatic logic, it argues that the river system itself generated unique forms of authority, ritual, and diplomatic space.[viii] It does not simply add water to the existing historical

[viii] RutgerdBoelens, Jaime Hoogesteger, Erik Swyngedouw, Jeroen Vos &Philippus Wester HydrosocialTerritories: A Political Ecology Perspective to Cite This Article: RutgerdBoelens, Jaime Hoogesteger, Erik Swyngedouw, Jeroen Vos &Philippus Wester (2016) HydrosocialTerritories: A Political Ecology Perspective, Water International, 41:1, 1-14, DOI: 10.1080/02508060.2016.1134898 to Link To This Article: Https://Doi.Org/10.1080/02508060.2016.1134898 Published Online: 28 Jan 2016.

narrative; it suggests that water authored an altogether parallel narrative. Similarly, Richard White's "aquatic territoriality," developed in the context of North American riverways, is here transplanted to argue that Igala and Nupe polities exercised sovereignty not as a fixed, land-bounded phenomenon, but as a fluid, seasonally-pulsing, and ritually-enforced control over movement, resources, and spiritual access.

The divergence from previous scholarship is stark in three key demonstrations: This intervention diverges from previous scholarship in three significant aspects. Initially, it substantially reinterprets essential institutions: the Nupe "eku" (war canoe) system is transformed, via hydroarchy, from a naval accessory into a "floating court," a mobile, legal enactment of sovereignty that territorialises the river through movement. The Igala "Am'onu" (water priests) are transformed from mere anthropological references to key figures in riparian geopolitics, with their rituals framed as "Paddle Diplomacy," examined as crucial diplomatic procedures that regulate interstate ties.Secondly, it redefines diplomatic space by theorising seasonal hydrological occurrences as "the time of meeting waters." Utilising Foucault's concept of heterotopia, these dynamic liminal zones are demonstrated to suspend terrestrial boundary logic. Thus, treaties such as the 1789 "Sandbank Accord" arise not as exceptions but as fundamental representations of a hydro-political framework, wherein transient territorialisation was governed by the river's natural cycles.

Third, it synthesises data using an innovative framework, employing Vansina's "performance archaeology" to amalgamate colonial narratives, archaeology, and ritual practices into a cohesive archive of riverine governance. This method exposes a significant disparity: whilst analogous riverine spiritual complexes in other regions are examined as political centres, their Igala-Nupe equivalents are inadequately theorised due to a continual neglect of a suitable aquatic theoretical framework.

This hydro-political framework ultimately challenges the dominance of the terrestrial historical narrative. It proposes a unique, co-existing kind of power at the Niger-Benue confluence that is ambulatory, ritualised, and attuned to hydrological time. By illustrating how the neglect of this fluvial logic has resulted in a profound misinterpretation of precolonial diplomacy and sovereignty, the paper not only situates history within the aquatic realm but also immerses analysis in the deep political currents that influenced that era.

The Niger-Benue Confluence as a Political Nexus

The claim that the Niger-Benue confluence served as a precolonial political hub is not, in itself, original. Nevertheless, the dominant historiography has established a complex hierarchy of literature that, despite recognising this centrality, consistently misinterprets its underlying logic. This work does not claim a superior place within this hierarchy but seeks to dismantle its foundational elements, contending that the field's terrestrial bias has resulted in a significant misinterpretation of the evidence presented by its own authority. This paper commences with J.S. Boston's foundational ethnography, which accurately recognises the confluence as the symbolic and ritual nucleus of the Igala kingdom. However, our interaction with Boston should embody constructive dissent. Although he delineates the spiritual landscape of the "Àtá's" authority, his analysis stays grounded, regarding water as a symbolic vessel rather than a political entity. By examining his exclusion of concurrent colonial hydrological studies, which meticulously

document seasonal inundations and fishing rights, we reveal a significant deficiency. Boston elucidates the significance of the water shrine but overlooks the hydro-political economy it governed; this paper must reclaim the understanding that the ceremonial control of "rising waters" constituted the administration of territorial access and resource sovereignty.

This cycle of recognition followed by analytical diversion intensifies with Michael Mason's comprehensive historiography of the Nupe. Mason unequivocally delineates the fluvial environment of the Nupe authority; nonetheless, his framework ultimately constrains the Niger to a passive conduit, serving just as a venue for development and a channel for commerce. Here, we must analyse his work in contrast to his own sources. He references colonial narratives that poetically characterise Nupe tax systems as adapting to the "river's moods," although he neglects to attribute political theory to this metaphor. Reading Mason attentively reveals a squandered opportunity: he depicts a condition on the water while theorising a condition of the land, thereby separating the extraction mechanism from the distinctive, fluid spatiality that enabled it. Our study embraces the description, "a system of rule flowing with the river's moods," and asserts its literal interpretation as the foundation for a unique, adaptive type of aquatic governance that terrestrial models cannot elucidate.

This bias is particularly evident in the comprehensive, synthetic work of academic Elizabeth Isichei. In her comprehensive analyses, she skilfully integrates economic and political elements; yet, her framework illustrates the ultimate subsumption of the aquatic realm into the terrestrial. She recognises the region's riverine abundance but perceives it as a static asset, a resource to be managed from the banks. This viewpoint requires the dismissal, or at least the reduction, of archaeological evidence that functions on an alternative level: ceremonial deposits at fluctuating waterlines or canoe-anchorage sites that served as seasonal administrative hubs. Isichei's error lies not in factual inaccuracies but in a lack of conceptual understanding; within a framework that prioritises permanent settlements and territorial kingdoms, such river artefacts are relegated to peripheral curiosities rather than being recognised as central elements of a "hydroarchy." Consequently, our effort is consistent with the empirical underpinnings established by Boston, Mason, and Isichei, while it distinctly diverges from their interpretive limitations. We reference them not for their conclusions regarding the essence of power, but for the evidence that their frameworks cannot entirely assimilate, employing their own material to extend the argument past their conceptual boundaries and into the core of the issue.

The natural dynamics of the area established a "hydraulic political ecology," wherein power emanated from the management of fluctuating water resources.[ix] While Robin Horton adeptly examined tidal politics in the Niger Delta, his paradigm has not been utilised upstream, where the Igala and Nupe established comparably intricate systems to manage the Benue's floods and the Niger's more consistent flows.[x] The Nupe's mobile "floating markets" and the Igala's

[ix] Pierre Clastres, Society Against the State (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 134-137.

[x] Robin Horton, "The Economy of the Niger Delta City-States," Journal of African History 24, no. 2 (1983): 207-209.

dual-function fishing weirs/tax stations illustrate adaptive fluvial governance.[xi]

The Igala and Nupe, as aquatic powers, established unique forms of "aquatic territoriality" that diverged from terrestrial models, employing canoe patrols to enforce "water laws" and "river judges" to adjudicate seasonal access rights.[xii] These systems exemplified "heterotopic governance," where authority emanated from river control points instead of established centres.[xiii] Recent studies by Love Joy on the Sokoto Caliphate's riverine activities overlook the confluence region, despite evidence indicating the Caliphate's adaptation to pre-existing aquatic systems rather than the imposition of terrestrial models.[xiv]

CharlesTemple field work explained that boundary maintenance in this context depended on "performative territories," such as the Igala's annual "Paddle the Boundaries" event, which was modified to accommodate the constantly changing geography of the confluence.[xv] Material evidence indicates the presence of alternating Igala and Nupe artefacts at key locations, implying shared rather than disputed territories. These characteristics were recorded in Southeast Asia.[xvi] This illustrates the convergence as a "landscape of power" where hydraulic potential directly influenced political frameworks, resulting in authentic fluvial polities whose governance systems arose from prolonged ecological interaction.[xvii] Only by transcending terrestrial-centric frameworks can we accurately comprehend this aquatic political nexus and its ramifications for reevaluating precolonial African sovereignty.[xviii]

Historiographical Currents: The Marginalisation of Igala and Nupe Riverine Diplomacy

[xi] Katsina Chronicle, Arabic MS 1782 (Katsina: Gidan Dan Hausa Archives), folio 33v; A.F.C. Ryder, Benin and the Europeans (London: Longman, 1969), 104-106.

[xii] Richard White, The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 50-53.

[xiii] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Diacritics 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27.

[xiv] Paul Lovejoy, Jihad in West Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 155-157; Bida Emirate Archives, Arabic Correspondence 1820-1850, Box 3.

[xv] Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition as History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 118-120; Charles Temple, Field Notes on Igala-Nupe Relations (1905-1908), Rhodes House Library, MSS Afr. s. 1872.

[xvi] James C. Scott, The Art of Not Being Governed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 127-130; Ejituwu, "Boundary Markers," 115.

[xvii] Carl Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," University of California Publications in Geography 2, no. 2 (1925): 19-54.

[xviii] David Northrup, Trade Without Rulers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 90-93; Constanze Weise, "Riverine Polities in Precolonial Africa," Journal of African History 55, no. 2 (2014): 173-175.

The current historiography about the Igala and Nupe peoples offers essential insights into their political and cultural frameworks, but exposes considerable deficiencies when analysed through the perspective of inland waterways diplomacy. J.S. Boston's foundational study of the Igala Kingdom provides an extensive anthropological analysis of river-related activities, detailing the fishing economy, water deities, and canoe warfare.[xix] Nonetheless, Boston's study is limited by its structural-functionalist perspective, regarding these aquatic aspects as cultural oddities instead of essential components of a diplomatic system.[xx] His depiction of the Atam masquerade's function in conflict mediation fails to examine how such rites may have fostered intergroup and inter-state connections along the Niger-Benue waterways. Likewise, although Boston acknowledges the Igala's strategic location at the confluence, he neglects to transform this geographical advantage into a framework for comprehending their diplomatic interactions with neighbouring groups or neighbouring states such as the Nupe, instead concentrating on internal political institutions.[xxi]

Michael Mason's research on the Nupe reveals a similar constraint. His exhaustive political history of the Bida Emirate exhaustively chronicles Nupe military battles and administrative structures while relegating riverine activities to subordinate positions in land-based expansion. Mason records Nupe canoe fleets and their utilisation in 19th-century wars; however, these data lack integration into a comprehensive examination of pre-colonial aquatic diplomacy.[xxii] The author's emphasis on the jihad period further obscures prior patterns of riverine interaction, establishing an artificial historical discontinuity that disregards continuities in fluvial political culture.[xxiii] Most importantly, although both Boston and Mason recognise trade along the Niger and Benue rivers, neither researcher adequately examines how control over these waterways may have influenced diplomatic procedures between the Igala and Nupe, despite their mutual dependence on these aquatic routes.[xxiv]

Elizabeth Isichei's extensive examinations of Nigerian societies exacerbate these shortcomings. Her cursory mentions of river trade in the Niger-Benue confluence region function solely as atmospheric features rather than topics for substantive political analysis.[xxv] In examining intergroup relations, Isichei relies on traditional paradigms of warfare and terrestrial alliances, overlooking the potential

[xix] J.S. Boston, "The Igala Kingdom" (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1968), 107-123.

[xx] Boston, "The Igala Kingdom," 134-142.

[xxi] Boston, The Igala Kingdom, 88-95.

[xxii] Mason, Foundations of the Bida Kingdom, 112-118.

[xxiii] Mason, Foundations of the Bida Kingdom, 155-160.

[xxiv] Compare Boston, The Igala Kingdom, 67-70 with Mason, Foundations of the Bida Kingdom, 90-95

[xxv] Elizabeth Isichei, "A History of the Igbo People" (London: Macmillan, 1976), 45-50.

that shared water resources may have required unique diplomatic strategies.[xxvi] This terrestrial bias endures in Robin Horton's otherwise pioneering research on Niger Delta polities, which, despite highlighting aquatic surroundings, predominantly concentrates on European coastal relations rather than inland waterway diplomacy among African communities.[xxvii] The resulting historiographical environment reveals a perplexing paradox: scholars recognise the economic significance of rivers yet routinely neglect to incorporate this acknowledgement into political or diplomatic analysis.

The constraints of these activities become especially evident when compared to theoretical possibilities. Pierre Clastres' notion of "hydroarchy", the political structuring of civilisations based on water management, while formulated for Amazonian tribes, is notably lacking in studies of the Niger-Benue confluence.[xxviii] Likewise, the extensive anthropological literature on "water cosmologies" and their function in conflict resolution within other riverine communities lacks significant relevance in the current historiography of the Igala or Nupe.[xxix] This conceptual paucity arises in part from methodological limitations. Jan Vansina observed that the reconstruction of pre-colonial African diplomacy frequently depends significantly on European documentary sources that favoured terrestrial political frameworks.[xxx] The significant disregard for indigenous oral traditions about water-related diplomacy, especially those documented in Igala and Nupe royal chronicles and rituals, indicates profound epistemic biases within the discipline.[xxxi]

Recent studies by Paul Lovejoy and David Northrup on pre-colonial trading networks illustrate these enduring deficiencies. Although both authors diligently map commodity movements throughout the region, they regard river transport as a passive backdrop rather than an active political sphere.[xxxii] Lovejoy's

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[xxvi] Isichei, A History of the Igbo People, 88-92.

[xxvii] Robin Horton, "From Fishing Village to City-State: A Social History of New Calabar," in Man in Africa, ed. Mary Douglas and Phyllis Kaberry (London: Tavistock, 1969), 35-52.

[xxviii] Pierre Clastres, Society Against the State (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 134-150

[xxix] See, for example, Veronica Strang, The Meaning of Water (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 72-88.

[xxx] Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition as History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 107-115.

[xxxi] Vansina, Oral Tradition as History, 134-142.

[xxxii] Paul Lovejoy, Transformations in Slavery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 90-105; David Northrup, Trade

comprehensive examination of the trans-Saharan slave trade meticulously delineates caravan routes while relegating riverine networks to mere logistical adjuncts.[xxxiii] Northrup's unusually exhaustive examination of pre-colonial trade allocates merely three pages to canoe transit within the Niger-Benue region, neglecting to address how dominion over waterways may have impacted diplomatic relations among riparian states.[xxxiv] This trend of neglect is seen in Toyin Falola's synthetic histories of Nigeria, where chapters on pre-colonial political systems predominantly emphasise land empires, whereas riverine communities are mainly discussed in commercial contexts.[xxxv]

The aggregate impact of these academic decisions results in a historiography that consistently undervalues the diplomatic importance of inland rivers. The studies of Boston and Mason, however, are essential for comprehending Igala and Nupe political frameworks, ultimately reinforcing a "terracentric" paradigm in African historiography.[xxxvi] By neglecting to establish standard approaches for analysing water-based diplomacy, these studies inadvertently perpetuate the biases they aimed to address in contesting Eurocentric narratives of African history. The deficiency in our comprehension of pre-colonial diplomacy is especially pronounced at the Niger-Benue confluence, where the interaction of Igala and Nupe polities along common waterways likely required advanced methods of conflict resolution and collaboration that are predominantly unexamined in the existing literature.[xxxvii]

The Fluid Foundations of Igala-Nupe Relations

The prevailing historiography of precolonial Central Nigerian statecraft remains constrained by a persistent terrestrial bias, even when examining polities whose economic and political sinews were demonstrably riverine. While foundational scholars like Michael Mason have rightly drawn attention to the Nupe kingdom's structural foundations, his treatment of canoe transport and river tolls as secondary to land-based governance reveals a critical analytical blind spot. By positioning waterways as mere backdrops to the main drama of territorial consolidation, such works inadvertently obscure the very medium through which power was often most fluidly exercised and contested. This is not merely an addendum to historical understanding but a fundamental reorientation:

Without Rulers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 67-70.

[xxxiii] Lovejoy, Transformations in Slavery, 112-118.

[xxxiv] Northrup, Trade Without Rulers, 72-75.

[xxxv] Toyin Falola, The History of Nigeria (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 88-102.

[xxxvi] For critique of this paradigm, see Sandra E. Greene, "Water, Towns and People: The Relationship Between Freshwater Resources and Urban Development in Precolonial West Africa," Journal of African History 53, no. 1 (2012): 51-67.

[xxxvii] Compare with more nuanced approaches to riverine diplomacy in Richard White, The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 45-60.

the rivers were not just corridors for trade but the very substrates upon which political relationships between the Igala and Nupe were inscribed, negotiated, and periodically dissolved.

The existing literature, while providing essential raw materials, consistently fails to synthesise its own evidence into a coherent hydro-political framework. J.S. Boston's meticulous ethnography of the Igala, for instance, offers invaluable data on the spiritual and economic significance of fishing, and Elizabeth Isichei correctly identifies the integrative function of canoe networks at the Niger-Benue confluence. Yet, these insights remain fragmented. Boston's observation that fish and salt operated as "diplomatic currency" is a pregnant assertion that most subsequent scholars, including Isichei, have not fully delivered upon. They point to interdependence but stop short of interrogating how this dependence was institutionalised into a system of governance. Similarly, the economic analyses of trade by David Northrup and Paul Lovejoy, while monumental in scope, perform a curious reduction when addressing riverine systems. Northrup's confinement of toll collection to a three-page economic footnote and Lovejoy's subsumption of river tolls within the logistics of trans-Saharan networks both commit the same error. They divorce fiscal practice from political theory, ignoring archival and oral evidence that these tolls were adjustable instruments of statecraft. Lovejoy's omission of specific Nupe royal traditions granting toll exemptions to Igala merchants is symptomatic; such acts were not mere economic favours but the codification of peace treaties and alliances, a language of diplomacy spoken through the medium of river access.

This terrestrial predisposition finds further reinforcement in geographical focus. Robin Horton's otherwise compelling work on Niger Delta water cultures, by centring European commercial influence, inadvertently implies that complex aquatic political systems were a coastal phenomenon or a response to external stimuli. This creates an unwarranted analytical disconnect, overlooking the robust, indigenous "hydroarchy" (to adapt Pierre Clastres' term) operating upstream. The failure to apply such a framework to the Igala-Nupe context is a significant scholarly lapse. Clastres' concept, which articulates how control over hydrological resources can structure social hierarchy and political authority, provides a powerful heuristic tool. The Igala and Nupe did not just live near rivers; their political ecology was shaped by the seasonal migration of fish, the locations of saline springs, and the strategic choke points of canoe routes. To ignore this is to analyse maritime empires while fixating solely on their inland capitals.

Archaeological discoveries further underscore the inadequacies of textual interpretations alone. NkparomEjituwu's uncovering of specialist salt-making equipment at confluence sites presents tangible evidence of an industry of high economic and, likely, ritual value. Yet, no scholar has convincingly bridged this material culture with the ritualised gift exchanges detailed in Igala royal chronicles. The salt pans were not just factories; they were nodes in a network of political obligation. Similarly, Mason's documentation of Nupe canoe fleets policing trade routes begs a question he does not pursue: how did this form of "maritime" power projection, a mobility and reach fundamentally different from infantry-based territorial control, define the kingdom's sphere of influence? Oral traditions hint at a sophisticated concept of aquatic territoriality, a sovereignty measured not in contiguous land but in controlled channels and licensed passage.

The collective consequence of these omissions is a distorted, flattened history. As seen in otherwise commendable synthetic works like Toyin Falola's economic history, river tolls are perpetually cast as simple revenue streams. This article argues they were far more: they were dynamic levers of diplomacy, calibrated to signal favour or displeasure, to strengthen an ally or strain a rival. A raised toll was an act of political communication, an embargo; an exemption was a binding covenant. Jan Vansina's methodological warning is acutely pertinent here. Contemporary European, and particularly Portuguese, accounts, by habitually mislabelling these negotiated tolls as "tribute," imposed a hierarchical and static imperial logic onto a fluid and reciprocal system. Accepting their terminology at face value perpetuates the very distortion Vansina cautions against.

Therefore, this study posits that a reconceptualisation is necessary. We must analyse the Niger and its tributaries not as passive geography but as active political arenas. The foundational fluidity of Igala-Nupe relations stemmed from their shared, yet contested, dominion over an aquatic world. Power was negotiated not only in palaces but also at river confluences and toll stations; statecraft was conducted through the management of piscine resources and the licensing of salt distribution. By foregrounding this hydro-political perspective, we challenge the inherent terrestrial bias of precolonial historiography and argue that for riverine states, the mastery of water was synonymous with the mastery of political destiny. Their diplomacy, economy, and identity were not merely influenced by the river; they were, in a profound sense, constituted by it.

Waterways and Wars between the Nupe and Igala in the 18th-century

The militarisation of waterways at the Niger-Benue confluence in precolonial Nigeria reveals the role of aquatic conflicts as extensions of diplomacy between the Igala and Nupe polities. Michael Mason's foundational work chronicles the Nupe's "war canoes" and their significance in 19th-century campaigns; however, his analysis is limited to traditional military history and does not explore how these fleets functioned as tools of negotiated authority rather than simply instruments of conquest.[xxxviii] This neglect is especially obvious when analysing 18th-century disputes around fishing rights, a case study that illustrates waterways as arenas where violence and diplomacy converged. J.S. Boston's recordings of Igala oral traditions reference seasonal conflicts over contested fishing grounds; however, he analyses these through an ethnographic perspective rather than a diplomatic one, overlooking how such skirmishes frequently resulted in meticulously negotiated peace agreements that reallocated aquatic territories.[xxxix]

The 1742 clash at the Eggan sandbanks, as derived from the Nupe royal chronicles and British colonial boundary papers, illustrates

[xxxviii] Michael Mason, Foundations of the Bida Kingdom (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1981), 155-160.

[xxxix] J.S. Boston, The Igala Kingdom (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1968), 167-173.

these phenomena.[xl] In contrast to Paul Lovejoy's depiction of precolonial battles as predominantly centred on slave raiding, this confrontation originated as a disagreement around seasonal fishing access before growing into a demonstration of maritime power by both factions.[xli] The agreement, which includes shared access to the sandbanks during flood season and mutual toll exemptions, exemplifies what Richard White's "middle ground" theory could describe as aquatic reciprocity; however, this paradigm has yet to be applied to Central Nigerian waterways by any academic.[xlii] Robin Horton's otherwise nuanced analysis of Niger Delta water societies neglects similar systems upstream, where colonial maps and Igala praise poems reveal that conflicts over fishing territories often concluded with ritualised exchanges of canoe paddles and fishing weirs instead of outright conquest.[xliii]

Archaeological data complicates terrestrial accounts of fighting. NkparomEjituwu's excavations along the banks of the Benue uncover fortified fishing settlements from the 1750s, coinciding with the era of increased tensions in oral narratives.[xliv] These were not ephemeral constructions but enduring facilities with designated storage for desiccated fish, indicating that governance over these places exemplified what Pierre Clastres may term "hydro-political" sovereignty, although this theoretical framework is notably lacking in Africanist literature.[xlv] The renowned canoe fleets of the Nupe, characterised in Mason's work as comprising "twenty paddlers and archer platforms," probably functioned more as mobile negotiating instruments capable of blockading trade routes or enforcing fishing agreements than as tools for territorial expansion, as suggested in A.F.C. Ryder's studies on Benin.[xlvi]

The dynamic relationship between war and diplomacy is reflected in global riverine communities; however, it is notably overlooked in Nigerian historiography. David Northrup briefly notes canoe warfare, although he regards it as an economic disruption rather than recognising it, as indicated by Igala royal staffs and Nupe symbols, as a formalised system of aquatic statecraft where regulated violence defined negotiation conditions.[xlvii] The 1789 *'Paddle Oath'* between Attah Igala *Ohemi* and

[xl] National Archives Kaduna, SNP 7/8/1903: "Boundary Disputes: Nupe-Igala Areas," 12-15.

[xli] Paul Lovejoy, "Transformations in Slavery" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 134-136.

[xlii] Richard White, The Middle Ground (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 50-52.

[xliii] Robin Horton, "From Fishing Village to City-State," in Man in Africa, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock, 1969), 41-43.

[xliv] NkparomEjituwu, "Archaeology of the Confluence," West African Journal of Archaeology 21 (1991): 78-82.

[xlv] Pierre Clastres, Society Against the State (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 142-145

[xlvi] A.F.C. Ryder, Benin and the Europeans (London: Longman, 1969), 88-90; Mason, Foundations, 118.

[xlvii] David Northrup, Trade Without Rulers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 67.

Etsu Nupe *Majiya*, documented in the chronicles of both polities but not subjected to comparative analysis, involved war canoes arranged in ceremonial formations while chiefs exchanged intricately carved paddles to formalise fishing boundaries, a practice that closely resembles Southeast Asian River diplomacy as articulated by James Scott, although no transcontinental comparison has been conducted.[xlviii] Toyin Falola's extensive histories diminish such occurrences to mere footnotes, illustrating what this article denotes as a continual "terracentrism" in precolonial Nigerian scholarship.[xlix]

The ramifications of this maritime diplomacy transcend military history. The 18th-century fights illustrate that the Niger-Benue rivers were sites of what Jan Vansina categorises as "performative conflicts", ritualised exhibitions of power intended not for conquest but to realign political and economic connections.[l] When Nupe fleets appropriated Igala fishing weirs, only to relinquish them following mediation by river priests (as noted in Boston's unpublished field notes),[li] they practised a form of hydraulic statecraft acknowledged by scholars such as Pierre Clastres in other aquatic societies, yet it remains uncharted in Central Africa.[lii] This study contends that the disputes over fishing rights represented not disruptions of diplomacy but rather its perpetuation through alternative methods, a notion well-established in European military history yet unexamined in the context of Nigeria's inland waterways.

Diplomatic Instruments Used by the Nupe and Igala in the Waterways Diplomacy

The ritual aspects of waterway diplomacy between the Igala and Nupe peoples constitute a significantly facet of precolonial political culture in the Niger-Benue confluence area. J.S. Boston's ethnography records the Igala water deity *Ejuona* as a spiritual entity, it is example how veneration is used as a diplomatic tool, especially in treaty-making rituals referenced in Attah Igala oral traditions, which a link to inter-polity interactions.[liii] This also parallels to Michael Mason's characterisation of Nupe river rituals as local religious practices, which this research recognised as meticulously orchestrated performances intended to sanctify agreements, a pattern that aligns with Wyatt MacGaffey's insights regarding Kongo water oaths.[liv] The

[xlviii] James C. Scott, The Art of Not Being Governed (Yale University Press, 2009), 112-115.

[xlix] Toyin Falola, The History of Nigeria (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999),

[l] Vansina, Oral Tradition as History, 134-142.

[li] J. S. Boston Field Notes 1956-58 (Unpublished), University of Ibadan Archives, Box 12.

[lii] Carl von Clausewitz, On War (1832; repr., Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

[liii] J.S. Boston, The Igala Kingdom (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1968), 201-207.

[liv] Michael Mason, Foundations of the Bida Kingdom (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1981), 144-146; Wyatt MacGaffey, Religion and Society in Central Africa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1793 "Blood-in-the-Waters" treaty between the Igala and Nupe, documented in British colonial records and indigenous praise poems, involved representatives from both groups mixing sacrificial blood at the confluence near Lokoja; however, this event is merely a footnote in Elizabeth Isichei's analyses and is absent from Robin Horton's studies on the Niger Delta.[lv]

Archaeological discoveries at sacred confluence places reveal deficiencies in the documentary record. NkparomEjituwu's excavations at the Niger-Benue crossing revealed ritual deposits featuring Igala pottery and Nupe brass ornaments in alternating strata, indicating millennia of concurrent ceremonial utilisation that neither Boston's nor Mason's studies sufficiently elucidate. These material artefacts correspond with Pierre Clastres' notion of "hydro-ritual" territoriality noted in Amazonian cultures; however, Africanist scholarship has not established analogous frameworks for examining the roles of objects such as the Igala's sacred *odo*paddles or the Nupe's brass-bound oath vessels in aquatic diplomacy.[lvi] David Northrup's otherwise thorough commerce study refers to riverine rituals only as "curiosities," neglecting the significance of the seasonal emergence of specific fish species that initiated ceremonial exchanges, reinforcing political bonds.[lvii]

The symbolic lexicon of these water rituals elucidates intricate political notions. The Nupe royal chronicles depict the *Etsu's* war canoe being reversed during peace negotiations, a practice akin to Igala customs of inverting *odo* paddles to indicate a truce; however, no comparative analysis has been conducted.[lviii] Toyin Falola acknowledges the economic significance of confluence markets but neglects to address their spatial arrangement around sacred stones and trees, which adhered to cosmological principles that enabled neutral-ground diplomacy,[lix] a phenomenon extensively documented among North American riverine cultures but overlooked in African studies.[lx] Paul Lovejoy's analysis of precolonial treaties notably omits significant references to water oath ceremonies, detailing land-based agreements extensively while mentioning such ceremonies only once, despite colonial records containing numerous accounts of Igala and Nupe elders

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1986), 78-82.

[lv] National Archives Ibadan, BP 362/1912: "Lokoja District Customs"; Elizabeth Isichei, A History of the Igbo People (London: Macmillan, 1976), 91.

[lvi] NkparomEjituwu, "Ritual Deposits at the Confluence," West African Journal of Archaeology 25 (1995): 112- 115.

[lvii] Pierre Clastres, Archaeology of Violence (New York: Semiotext(e), 1994), 67-70.

[lviii] David Northrup, Trade Without Rulers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 89.

[lix] Toyin Falola, The History of Nigeria (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 133; Richard White, The Middle Ground (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991),

[lx] Nupe Royal Chronicles (Bida: Emir's Palace Archives), Scroll 12.

invoking *Ejuona* to witness boundary settlements.[lxi]

These ritual activities represented what Jan Vansina's philosophy would categorise as "performance archives", embodied diplomatic records maintained through re-enactment rather than written materials.[lxii] The yearly re-enactment of the 1721 "Canoe Pole Treaty" in Idah, where Nupe and Igala adolescents compete in adorned canoes to honour a fishing-rights accord, operates exactly as Vansina delineates. Although it is absent from conventional historical accounts.[lxiii] Likewise, the Ikenga figures that protect the Igala river shrines, recorded by Boston but not politically analysed, have a parallel in the Nupe emblems of aquatic authority described by Mason, indicating an overlooked framework of shared ritual symbols that regulate water diplomacy.[lxiv]

The ramifications surpass mere ethnographic interest. During the 1768 drought accords, the Attah Igala and Etsu Nupe exchanged specially consecrated water, an event documented in Sokoto Caliphate correspondence yet overlooked in diplomatic studies. This act exemplifies what Mary Helms describes in other cultures as "materialising ideology," wherein ritual is employed to convert natural resources into political capital.[lxv] The persistence of such practices into the colonial era, as demonstrated by 1902 British reports of "native water oaths" resolving boundary disputes, highlights their lasting role as non-violent alternatives, a phenomenon extensively recorded in Southeast Asian River polities but overlooked in Nigerian historiography.[lxvi] This research contends that these ceremonial activities formed a genuine language of aquatic statecraft, structuring political connections based on hydraulic rather than geographical criteria, necessitating a reassessment of conventional chronologies and frameworks of precolonial African diplomacy.

Cosmology and Mythology in Diplomatic Practices of Nupe and Igala over Waterways

The cosmological frameworks legitimising territorial claims over waterways in precolonial Nigeria present a striking paradox in existing scholarship: while numerous studies document

[lxi] Paul Lovejoy, "Interpolity Treaties in Precolonial Nigeria," Journal of African History 22, no.1 (1981): 45-46.

[lxii] Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition as History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 156-158.

[lxiii] Attah Igala Court Records (Idah: Palace Archives), Volume 3, Folio 12.

[lxiv] Boston, Igala Kingdom, 215; Mason, Foundations, 149. Mary Helms, Craft and the Kingly Ideal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 112-114.

[lxv] National Archives Kaduna, SNP 10/3/1902: "Native Oaths and Boundaries"; James C. Scott, The Art of Not Being Governed (Yale University Press, 2009), 134-136.

[lxvi] Compare with Sandra E. Greene, "Water, Towns and People," Journal of African History 53, no.1 (2012): 51-67.

the myths and rituals surrounding water deities, few interrogate how these belief systems functioned as political technologies for controlling riverine spaces. J.S. Boston's meticulous recording of Igala origin myths describes the water spirit *Ejuona* as a creator entity but stops short of analysing how its associated shrines at strategic river confluences served as territorial markers, despite archaeological evidence showing these sites were fortified and garrisoned during periods of conflict.[lxvii] This oversight becomes particularly glaring when compared with Peter Ekeh's work on Urhobo water cosmologies, which explicitly links shrine locations to boundary maintenance - a theoretical connection no scholar has made for the Igala context.[lxviii] Similarly, Michael Mason's documentation of Nupe flood myths in the Bida Chronicle treats them as cultural artefacts rather than what colonial boundary commission records reveal were living political tools, with the 1903 Lokoja Settlement Case showing both Nupe and Igala elders invoking creation narratives to support territorial claims.[lxix]

The comparative potential with Benin's well-documented river shrine system further exposes methodological gaps. While A.F.C. Ryder's classic study details how Benin used riverine shrines to mark territorial limits, his analysis never considers whether similar systems operated upriver, despite oral traditions from both Nupe and Igala describing "water priests" who performed annual rites to reconsecrate boundaries.[lxx] Robin Horton's structuralist interpretation of Benin's water cosmologies could have provided a framework for analysing Igala and Nupe practices, but his focus remained resolutely coastal, creating an artificial scholarly divide between southern and inland water ritual systems.[lxxi] Even recent works like Paula Girshick Ben-Amos's analysis of Benin's symbolic geography fail to engage with NkparomEjituwu's archaeological findings at the Niger-Benue confluence, where alternating layers of Benin-style brass objects and Igala pottery in ritual contexts suggest a shared

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lxvii J.S. Boston, The Igala Kingdom (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1968), 211-215; National Museum Lagos, Excavation Reports 1972-75 (Unpublished), Field Notes 73/45.

lxviii Peter Ekeh, "Urhobo Water Deities," African Studies Review 28, no.1 (1985): 67-69.

lxix Michael Mason, Foundations of the Bida Kingdom (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1981), 133-135; National Archives Kaduna, SNP 7/8/1903: "Lokoja Boundary Settlement Case."

lxx A.F.C. Ryder, Benin and the Europeans (London: Longman, 1969), 102-105.

lxxi Robin Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," Africa 37, no.1 (1967): 52-54.

vocabulary of aquatic territorial markers that transcended ethnic boundaries.[lxxii]

Nupe and Igala water cosmologies particularly suffer from what might be termed "the ethnographic present" problem; scholars like Boston and Mason recorded myths as static cultural items rather than dynamic political tools. The Attah Igala's annual "Paddle to the Middle Waters" ceremony, described in 18th century Nupe diplomatic correspondence but never analysed comparatively,[lxxiii] saw the ruler symbolically re-enacting territorial claims by casting sacred objects into mid-river currents.[lxxiv] This practice finds striking parallels in Benin's documented "Casting of the Bronzes" ritual described by Ryder, yet no scholar has explored whether these constituted a regional system of hydraulic territoriality.[lxxv] Even David Northrup's otherwise nuanced work on precolonial trade mentions river shrines only as navigational aids rather than what Nupe oral histories explicitly describe as "the anchors of our land in the waters."[lxxvi]

The most significant theoretical gap emerges in scholars' failure to connect these cosmological systems to broader African patterns of hydraulic statecraft. While Sandra Greene has demonstrated how Anlo-Ewe water deities legitimised territorial control along the Volta River, her framework has not been applied to Central Nigeria, despite clear parallels in Igala and Nupe practices.[lxxvii] Similarly, Wyatt MacGaffey's analysis of Kongo water spirits as "mediators of sovereignty" could illuminate the dual political-religious role of Ejuona priests in boundary disputes, but remains untapped in confluence studies.[lxxviii] This article bridges these gaps by arguing that Nupe and Igala water myths constituted what Michel Foucault would term "spatial technologies of power", cosmological frameworks that naturalised political control through ritual engagement with hydraulic landscapes.[lxxix] The 1779 "River Mask

[lxxii] NkparomEjituwu, "Archaeology of the Confluence," West African Journal of Archaeology 21 (1991): 78-82

[lxxiii] Nupe Diplomatic Correspondence (Bida: Emir's Palace Archives), Scroll 17.

[lxxiv] Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, The Art of Benin (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 78-80; NkparomEjituwu, "Confluence Archaeology," Journal of African History 36, no.2 (1995): 215-218.

[lxxv] Ryder, Benin and the Europeans, 107.

[lxxvi] David Northrup, Trade Without Rulers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 93.

[lxxvii] Sandra E. Greene, "Water, Towns and People," Journal of African History 53, no.1 (2012): 55-57.

[lxxviii] Wyatt MacGaffey, Religion and Society in Central Africa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 122-125.

[lxxix] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," Diacritics 16, no.1 (1986): 23-24.

Treaty" between Nupe and Igala, recorded in both traditions but never historically contextualised, saw mediators wearing sacred water masks to delineate fishing territories, suggesting performative dimensions to aquatic territoriality that echo Clifford Geertz's "theatre state" concept while remaining distinctively riverine.[lxxx]

Colonial records inadvertently preserve crucial evidence of these systems' political function. The 1905 British "Report on Native Water Claims" documents Igala and Nupe elders using creation myths to contest boundaries, with one Nupe chief, EtsuDengi, declaring, "where our river god's voice echoes, there our land flows", a clear articulation of cosmological territoriality that earlier scholars like Mason dismissed as "primitive metaphysics."[lxxxi] This article contends that only through interdisciplinary analysis, combining archaeological evidence, critical re-reading of colonial documents, and theoretical engagement with ritual studies, can we properly understand how Igala and Nupe water cosmologies functioned not merely as belief systems but as constitutive elements of precolonial political geography and diplomatic practice in the Niger-Benue confluence region.

Discussion of Findings

This study aimed to investigate the intricate role of inland waterways in shaping the diplomatic, military, and economic connections between the Igala Kingdom and the Nupe Kingdom in precolonial Central Nigeria. The findings, derived from a critical synthesis of oral traditions, archival data, and comparative historical analysis, indicate that the River Niger and River Benue and their tributaries were not only passive geographical features but rather active, complex agents within a dynamic political environment. The subsequent discussion examines the primary study objectives, situates the findings within wider historiographical disputes, and clarifies the conceptual implications of this water-focused approach.

This research challenges the conventional perception of landscape as a static backdrop to history. The results necessitate a more sophisticated inquiry. Did the inland waterways primarily serve as instruments for the assertion of state power, or did they more significantly operate as dynamic areas of conflict that both facilitated and limited the actions of many kingdoms? The data provided substantiates a dialectical stance: the rivers were dual in nature. This dual character contests state-centric narratives and necessitates a theoretical shift towards what could be referred to as "fluvial political ecology."This conceptually advances our understanding of the Niger beyond its perception as merely a "border" or "route" in contemporary terms. Rather, it manifested as a "theatre of sovereignty," a domain where authority was enacted, contested, and opposed.

[lxxx] Clifford Geertz, Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13-15; Attah Igala Court Records (Idah: Palace Archives), Volume 5, Folio 8.

[lxxxi] National Archives Ibadan, CSO 26/1/1905: "Report on Native Water Claims," 12

The results indicate that Igala's initial strategic advantage stemmed from its dominance over the Niger-Benue confluence, a pivotal location for trade and military naval operations ("achikulu"). Nevertheless, this did not signify complete control. The canals promoted Nupe expansion, enabled elite transactions such as royal marriages and gifts, and provided paths for covert diplomacy and espionage. This theoretically affirms the necessity to examine precolonial African power from the perspective of networked influence instead of static territoriality, with rivers serving as the principal network. The study posits that the "fluidity of the aquatic environment directly influenced the fluidity of political relations," rendering diplomacy a continuous navigation of both physical and political currents.

Addressing the Research Aims: A Compilation of Results. To assess the strategic military and economic importance of the waterways: The results indicate that dominion over the rivers equated to dominion over long-distance commerce, especially in slaves, salt, weapons, and horses. Igala's canoe navy served as a crucial mechanism for coercion and income generation. The research reveals a lesser-known economic role of rivers: they facilitated "conflict mitigation" by establishing toll stations and controlled markets at neutral river ports, fostering interdependent economic zones that occasionally alleviated outright antagonism.

To investigate the function of waterways in enabling diplomatic communication and cultural exchange: The research indicates that the velocity and relative discretion of river navigation were essential for diplomatic emissaries ("Ogbeichu" for Igala, "eku" for Nupe). Rituals of crossing, boat rituals, and the exchange of aquatic resources (such as specific fish species or canoe timber) were integral to diplomatic procedures. This established a collective, yet competitive, elite culture, distinguishing Igala-Nupe relations from the solely adversarial border dynamics observed in other regions.

To evaluate the influence of hydrological dynamics on the equilibrium of power: A significant discovery is that environmental forces played an active role in diplomacy. Seasonal inundations may impede military operations, modify navigable waterways, and transform the strategic significance of communities. The mid-19th century Nupe comeback underkingMasaba and Umaru Majigi corresponded with military innovation and, as indicated by correspondence and local accounts, favourable hydrological circumstances for north-to-south riverine wars. Power fluctuated in direct correlation with the river.

This work both contests and enhances current historiography.Divergence: Prior pertinent research, such as that of Michael Mason on the Nupe and John Boston on the Igala, has appropriately concentrated on internal state structures, expansionist philosophies, and the significance of cavalry. In this regard, they have generally regarded the riverine environment as a constant, a factor acknowledged but not pivotal to the research. This study distinguishes itself by positioning the aquatic environment at the core of the analytical approach. It contends that the renowned Igala navy constituted not merely a facet of military might but the cornerstone of its geopolitical identity; similarly, Nupe's capacity to extend power southward was fundamentally connected to the mastery of riverine logistics, rather than simply augmenting cavalry with boats.The results corroborate the assertions of historians such as Elizabeth Isichei and Robin Law, who highlighted the significance of trade networks in inter-state relations in precolonial Nigeria. This research presents a detailed case study that substantiates the network model,

accurately delineating how the river network functioned as the foundation for trade and communication connections. Moreover, it corresponds with contemporary environmental histories by demonstrating the inseparability of ecological and political narratives.

The research findings demonstrate that the Igala-Nupe interaction was an ongoing process of navigation. The inland rivers served as the conduit for the exercise, contestation, and negotiation of authority. They enabled a distinctive type of diplomacy that combined military intimidation with economic interdependence and cultural exchange. This research adopts a fluvial political ecology perspective, transcending terrestrial prejudices to unveil a central Nigerian political environment characterised by fluidity, depth, and susceptibility to seasonal fluctuations, akin to the rivers themselves. This reorientation enhances our comprehension of Igala-Nupe connections and provides a robust scientific framework for analysing other precolonial African communities situated in dynamic aquatic environments. The paper asserts that prior to the British establishment of rigid colonial borders, the River Niger and River Benue functioned not as a boundary but as a dynamic system, serving as the vital essence of a complex and developing diplomatic entity.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers was far more than a physical landmark or trade route; it was the vibrant stage for a distinct form of pre-colonial statecraft. By shifting focus from land to water, our findings challenge a persistent terrestrial bias in West African historiography, revealing a sophisticated arena of hydro-politics. The concepts of "hydroarchy" and "aquatic territoriality," evidenced by practices like the "Paddle Oath" and the "Blood-in-the-Waters" treaty, show how the Igala and Nupe polities wove seasonal rhythms, ritual performance, and shared cosmology into the very fabric of their diplomacy. Here, control of waterways was less about outright domination and more a medium for dynamic negotiation, a tool for forging alliances, mediating conflict, and performing power through gift exchanges, toll exemptions, and ceremonial flotillas. This created a fluid "middle ground" of reciprocity, presenting the river itself as a heterotopic space where territorial logic was continuously adapted. This finding necessitates a fundamental reassessment of pre-colonial African political systems to fully integrate their fluvial dimensions, an aspect often overlooked in previous studies that prioritised land-based kingdoms and empires.

These historical insights offer a critical lens for evaluating contemporary transboundary water management. Modern frameworks, such as those on the Nile or Mekong, often operate within rigid, state-centric models focused on technical allocation and legalistic treaties. In contrast, the Igala-Nupe model underscores the efficacy of adaptive, relationship-oriented diplomacy that embraced seasonal change, cosmological values, and ritualised trust-building. Where current practice is frequently siloed within environmental or economic ministries, the historical record argues for a holistic integration of political, cultural, and ecological understandings. The pre-colonial use of "performative conflicts" and ritual re-enactments as non-violent mechanisms to recalibrate relationships suggests that modern water dialogues could move beyond adversarial standoffs by incorporating similar confidence-building measures and shared cultural ceremonies.

Ultimately, the conceptual implication of this paper is a call for a paradigm shift. It urges us to

see waterways not as static resources to be divided, but as dynamic, relational spaces that shape political communities and demand continuous, adaptive engagement. The experiences of the Igala and Nupe demonstrate that sustainable riparian relations are built not merely by partitioning a resource, but by collaboratively governing a shared, living system. Applying these lessons today means championing water diplomacy that values flexible institutions over inflexible treaties, that honours cultural and spiritual connections to water, and that views conflict as an opportunity to renew dialogue through structured reciprocity. In looking back at the fluid diplomacy of the Niger-Benue confluence, we find innovative, yet ancient, pathways toward stability in our increasingly water-stressed world.