



Crossing Currents: The Role of the Niger River in Shaping Inter-Ethnic Relations among the Okun, Nupe and Igala in Nigeria Since Antiquity

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Abstract. The Niger River has historically served as a lifeline for West Africa, shaping the economic, political, and cultural relations of the Okun, Nupe and Igala peoples. In the pre-colonial period, the river functioned as a vital trade artery, facilitating barter exchanges, political alliances, and cultural integration. Canoe transportation enabled the movement of goods and ideas, while disputes over fishing rights and trade routes emphasised its strategic significance. Colonial rule disrupted these dynamics by imposing artificial boundaries, introducing a currency economy, and restructuring indigenous political systems, thereby altering inter-group relations. Despite these disruptions, the communities adapted, participating in colonial and post-colonial economies while preserving traditional networks. Post-independence, infrastructural projects such as Niger bridges in Lokoja and Onitcha reshaped trade and regional development, even as they displaced communities. The rivers also fostered cultural exchange, with shared languages, festivals, and religious practices reinforcing inter-ethnic identity. Today, environmental degradation, economic inequality, and modernisation pose new challenges, yet the Niger remains central to the resilience and integration of these communities. This study reinforces the enduring significance of the river in understanding inter-ethnic relations and regional history in Nigeria.

Keywords: Niger River, inter-ethnic relations, colonial disruption, cultural integration, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Rivers have long shaped human history, serving as sources of water and food, corridors for migration and trade, and catalysts for cultural and societal development (Hopkins, 1973; Holl, 2009). In Africa, the Niger River stands out for its historical and contemporary significance. Stretching over 4,180 kilometers through Guinea, Mali, Niger, Benin, and Nigeria, it unites diverse ecological zones and cultural

traditions, while supporting agriculture, fishing, and settlement (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Insoll, 2003). The Niger's floodplains have sustained human life for millennia, shaping political organisation and cultural interaction (Ilfie, 1995; Ajayi, 1989)

This study examines the Niger as both a physical and cultural force, highlighting its role in the rise of early states, inter-group relations, and contemporary communities, particularly the Okun, Igala, and Nupe peoples. The paper explores the intertwined economic, social and political dynamics that the Niger nurtured, considering historical transformations under colonialism and postcolonial changes, as well as modern challenges such as environmental degradation, inequality, and globalisation.

Archaeological evidence shows that by the Neolithic period, communities along the Niger had advanced food production, water management, and social organisation (McIntosh & McIntosh, 1981; Holl, 2009). Sites like Jenné-jeno in Mali demonstrate agriculture, fishing, craft specialisation, and trade networks connecting the Niger Valley to North Africa as early as the third millennium BCE (D'Andrea, 2007; Insoll, 2003). The river's fertile floodplains facilitated population density, social stratification, and the emergence of empires such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, which relied on the Niger for commerce, cultural unity, and political authority (Barry, 1998; Levtzion & Hopkins, 1981; Ajayi, 1989). The Niger River, therefore, was not merely a backdrop to early African civilisation but a catalyst for settlement, trade, and enduring cultural transformation, long before colonial influence.

While a lot of studies have been done on transportation and its early forms and transformations, adequate attention has not been paid to the River Niger. This study therefore examines the contribution of the River-Niger to national development etching out its colonial, post-colonial histories, challenges and significances.

By examining this, the study contributes to transport history, economic history and economic history.

2. Literature Review

There have been a growing number of studies on water transport in globally. Lubinda (2019) finds that Inland Water Transport in Zambia, particularly in the Barotse Sub-Basin, has been largely neglected despite its importance to rural livelihoods. The study finds that it supports employment, tourism, recreation, and affordable cargo movement, but faces challenges such as high costs, unsafe vessels, and poorly maintained waterways. Usage varies by season, with motorised vessels dominating the dry season and non-motorised ones in the wet season. It recommends improved maintenance, subsidies, and stronger policy regulation. UNECE (2022) advances that water transport offers significant benefits, including improved safety and reliability, reduced congestion, and enhanced environmental performance, while its comparative advantages lie in its sustainability and cost-efficiency, reflected in lower overall transport costs, reduced energy consumption per ton-kilometre, and a relatively low rate of accidents. Mutiani et al (2022) notes that transportation extends beyond the movement of people to include the distribution of goods, making it a central component of socio-economic development. Within this context, water transportation plays a significant role in sustaining livelihoods, particularly in riverine communities where it contributes to household income stability. They furthered that while attention has been given to traditional river transport systems such as *klotok*, which has remained in use for over six decades as a reliable mode of local mobility. Using qualitative approaches, studies generate descriptive insights into how such transport systems operate and adapt over time, with efforts made to ensure data validity through expert verification and alignment with official administrative records. Their Findings indicate that river transportation systems are vital to both service providers and users, highlighting a mutually dependent relationship that underpins local economies. However, maintaining this relationship requires active government involvement, particularly in establishing legal frameworks and operational policies that regulate the sector. The study underscores the importance of transparency in evaluating whether existing operational mechanisms enhance the welfare of transport operators.

Osoja (2019) examines the complementary role of water transport for commuters travelling between Ikorodu and Lagos Island within the Lagos metropolis. It focuses on how water transport infrastructure affects

mobility, whether improvements have encouraged a shift from road to water travel, and how patronage can be further enhanced. Using regression analysis to test its hypotheses, the study finds that while infrastructure improvements and management contribute to attracting commuters to water transport, overall mobility and travel comfort remain constrained by infrastructural inadequacies. The research concludes that the underdevelopment of inland waterways in the study area is largely due to insufficient funding, poor infrastructure provision, and inadequate maintenance, all of which limit the system's effectiveness and appeal to commuters. Chukwuma et al (2024) posits that Nigeria's industrial sector, despite its potential to reduce unemployment and drive wealth creation, has underperformed and contributed less to economic growth than expected. This gap reflects structural challenges within the sector, even with various policy efforts to stimulate development. The study examines how different transport modes influence industrial growth using data from the Central Bank of Nigeria and finds that inefficient road transport hinders productivity due to poor infrastructure and high logistics costs, while air and water transport contribute positively by supporting trade and efficient movement of goods. The paper recommends targeted improvements across all transport systems. It urges the Federal Ministry of Works and Housing to prioritize road rehabilitation, while agencies like Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria, Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority, and Nigerian Ports Authority should enhance airport and port infrastructure. Strengthening these transport networks is essential for boosting industrial productivity and achieving sustainable economic growth. Adenuga (2024) stresses that Waterways are increasingly recognized as vital economic assets, and Nigeria has significant untapped potential in this sector. In Lagos, inland water transport offers a cost-effective, efficient alternative to congested roads, improving mobility, trade, and productivity. It supports job creation, connects remote areas, and boosts agriculture, industry, and tourism. He however stated that challenges such as poor infrastructure, weak connectivity, and safety concerns persist and that addressing these through investment, policy support, and stakeholder collaboration is essential to unlock sustainable economic growth.

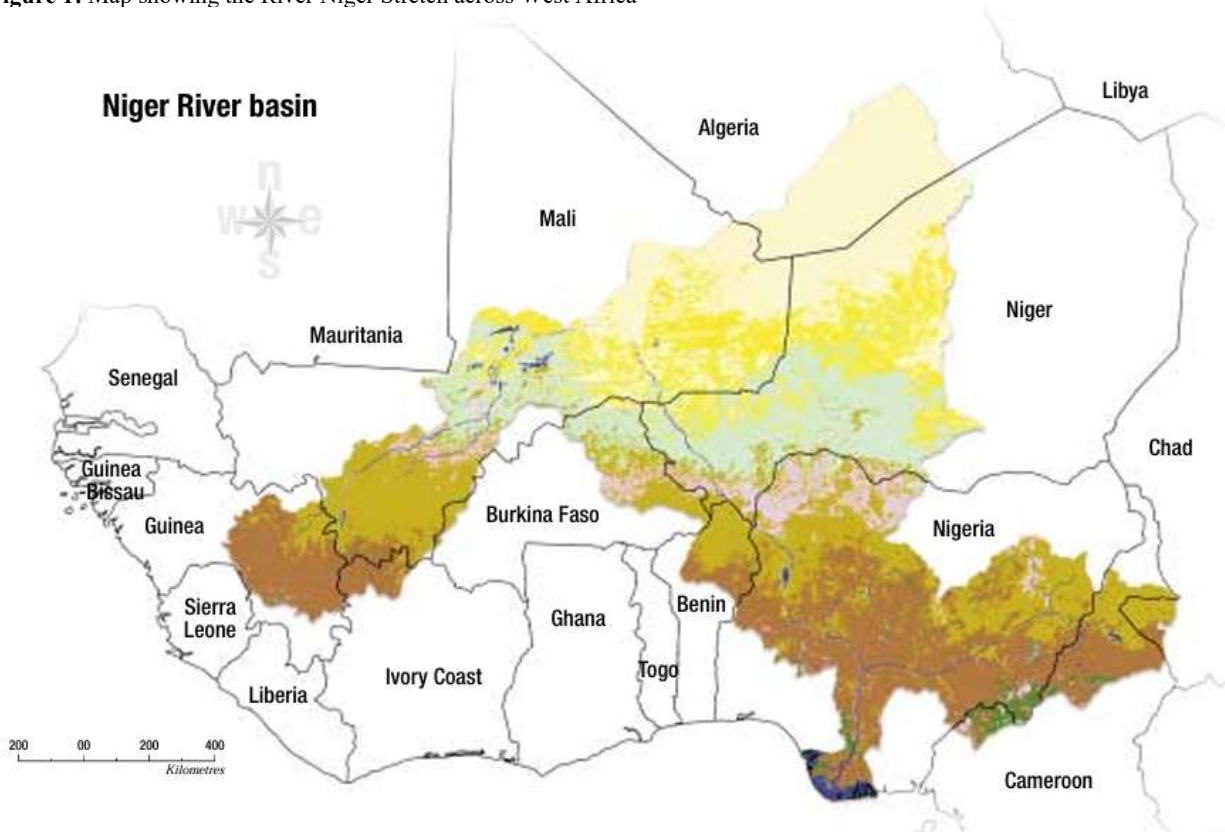
2.1 The Niger and Ethnic Groups in Present-day Nigeria: Okun, Igala, and Nupe

In present-day Nigeria, the Niger River has profoundly influenced the development and identity of communities such as the Okun, Igala, and Nupe. Each group maintained close ties to the river's ecology, trade networks, and political systems, shaping their

economic and social organisations. The Okun, a Yoruba subgroup in Kogi State, occupied fertile lands near the Niger-Benue confluence. Their economy relied on yam and cassava cultivation, fishing, and

crafts, with women playing central roles in local markets and trade networks connecting neighbouring communities (Lewu, 1996; Falola, 2008).

Figure 1: Map showing the River Niger Stretch across West Africa



Source: WWF International (nd)

The Igala, centered around Idah, became a dominant riverine kingdom between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, using the Niger as both a defensive barrier and a trade highway. The Attah of Igala derived political legitimacy through spiritual ties to the river (Boston, 1991; Okpoh, 2007). The Nupe, controlling the middle Niger, built a centralised state leveraging riverine trade in kola nuts, salt, and slaves, with ironworking and weaving further consolidating wealth and influence (Nadel, 1965; Mason, 1967; Isichei, 1976).

Figure 2: Niger River Basin: Areas and rainfall by country

Country	Total area of the country (km ²)	Area of the country within the basin (km ²)	As % of total area of basin (%)	As % of total area of country (%)	Average annual rainfall in the basin area		
					(mm)		
					min.	max.	mean
Guinea	245857	96880	4.5	39.4	1240	2180	1635
Côte d'Ivoire	322462	23770	1.0	7.4	1316	1615	1466
Mali	1240190	578850	25.5	46.7	45	1500	440
Burkina Faso	274000	76621	3.4	28.0	370	1280	655
Algeria	2381740	193449	8.5	8.1	0	140	20
Benin	112620	46384	2.0	41.2	735	1255	1055
Niger	1267000	564211	24.8	44.5	0	880	280
Chad	284000	20339	0.9	1.6	865	1195	975
Cameroon	440	89249	3.9	18.8	830	2365	1330
Nigeria	770	584193	25.7	63.2	535	2845	1185
For Niger basin		2273946	100.0		0	2845	690

Source FAO (nd)

Interactions among the Okun, Igala, and Nupe extended beyond economics, involving intermarriage, linguistic borrowing, and religious exchange. These connections illustrate the Niger's role not only as a boundary but as a corridor fostering multiethnic cooperation and cultural synthesis (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

2.2 Precolonial Trade, Politics, and Social Systems

In precolonial times, the Niger served as a vital artery of commerce, communication, and cultural integration. It linked the Okun, Igala, and Nupe, sustaining economic interdependence and political engagement. Agricultural produce, crafts, and livestock were exchanged across ethnic lines, with canoes facilitating bulk transport along the river (Akinwumi, 2003; Falola & Heaton, 2008). Market systems, regulated by customary laws and overseen by chiefs or women leaders, acted as centers of trade and social interaction, circulating news, technology, and religious ideas (Ajayi & Crowder, 1985; Mason, 1967). River-based trade often generated political alliances and rivalries. The Igala kingdom, under the Attah, controlled trade routes and collected tribute, while the Nupe monitored river crossings to dominate commerce (Boston, 1991; Nadel, 1965). Conflicts over markets and fishing rights were frequent, though diplomacy and intermarriage among elites helped stabilise relations (Okpeh, 2007).

Culturally, the Niger facilitated the diffusion of languages, religions, and artistic traditions. The Nupe adoption of Islam enabled trade with Hausa and Bornu merchants, influencing Igala and Okun societies (Isichei, 1976). Social institutions such as age grades and women's associations ensured that commerce also reinforced community cohesion and identity (Falola, 2008).

Thus, the Niger River in precolonial Nigeria functioned as both a unifier and divider, fostering trade, cultural exchange, and political integration, while simultaneously generating competition over its strategic resources.

3. Colonial Impact: Disruption and Adaptation along the Niger River

The arrival of British colonialism in the late nineteenth century reshaped the Niger River region, disrupting traditional economic, political, and social systems among the Okun, Igala, and Nupe peoples. The river, once a shared corridor of commerce and culture, was integrated into a global capitalist system favoring European interests.

3.1 Economic Transformation

Colonial policies prioritised resource extraction and cash crop production, replacing subsistence and barter economies with monetised systems focused on cocoa, palm oil, cotton, and groundnuts (Berry, 1975; Falola & Heaton, 2008). The Niger increasingly served as a transport route for export, while taxation and colonial currency undermined precolonial trade networks, compelling local populations to engage in wage labor or cash crop farming (Mabogunje,

1968; Watts, 1983). According to a worker, “Despite these pressures, some Okun communities continued traditional trading practices across the Niger, such as weaving and local market exchange”¹

3.2 Political Restructuring

Colonial administration also transformed indigenous political systems through the policy of indirect rule. In theory, this system sought to govern through existing rulers, but in practice it often distorted traditional authority structures. Among the Igala, the *Attah* was elevated and empowered by British recognition as a paramount ruler, consolidating his authority beyond traditional limits (Boston 88). By contrast, in Okun communities there was decentralised governance organised in small autonomous communities; the British appointed warrant chiefs who lacked legitimacy among the people (Afigbo 1972).

For the Nupe, whose centralised system was already well established, indirect rule reinforced the Emirate’s authority, but also made rulers accountable to colonial officials rather than their subjects (Nadel 1942). This dual loyalty frequently generated tensions within communities, as rulers were pressured to enforce unpopular policies such as taxation and labour requisition.

3.3 Social and Cultural Disruption

Colonialism reshaped social structures through missionary education, Christianisation, and gendered reordering of authority. Women, were previously central to market regulation but they lost influence as men were favoured in political and economic hierarchies (Ayandele, 1966; Mba, 1982).

4. Local Adaptations and Resistance in Post-Colonial Era

Communities demonstrated resilience by negotiating colonial pressures, some leveraging positions for wealth and prestige, others resisting via tax revolts or preserving traditions under colonial oversight (Falola, 2008; Okpeh, 2005). Following Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the Niger continued to support livelihoods but under new state-driven policies. Agricultural modernisation, infrastructural projects such as the Kainji Dam (1968), and hydroelectric initiatives transformed the river’s role, displacing thousands and altering fishing and farming economies (Ekundare, 1973; Hogben, 1975). The 1970s oil boom further shifted economic focus from agriculture to petroleum, affecting regional development (Watts, 1983).

4.1 Political and Administrative Reconfigurations

Post-independence state creation redefined ethnic and political alignments. The Okun’s integration into Kogi State fostered both cooperation and competition with the Igala, while the Nupe faced heightened inter-ethnic competition in Niger State (Ochonu, 2006). Traditional rulers retained cultural authority but operated increasingly as intermediaries, linking local populations to the modern state and dependent on state patronage (Osaghae, 1991).

4.2 Cultural Continuity and Economic Transformation

Despite the pressures of modernisation and religious change, the Niger River remained a stronghold of cultural identity. Among the Igala, river deities such as Idakpaja continued to receive veneration, illustrating the resilience of indigenous cosmologies in the face of Christianity and Islam (Idowu, 1989). Annual festivals linked to fertility, fishing, and river spirits preserved collective memory and reinforced intergenerational bonds. Among the Nupe, crafts such as weaving, dyeing, and blacksmithing survived but adapted to modern markets, blending tradition with innovation. The Okun maintained vibrant masquerade traditions and oral performances, many of which symbolically referenced the river as a source of life and continuity. Thus, while Western education and global religions reshaped belief systems, the Niger River remained embedded in cultural practices, rituals, and community identity.

4.3 Emerging Challenges and Opportunities

From the late twentieth century onward, the Niger River basin began to face serious environmental and socio-economic pressures. Deforestation, industrial pollution, and the cumulative effects of damming disrupted ecological balance, threatening fish stocks and water quality (Akinyele n.d.). Population growth increased demand on farmlands, leading to periodic conflicts over access to riverine resources. Yet, the river also presented opportunities for

innovation. Irrigation schemes expanded food production, while improved transport networks connected once-isolated riverine communities to regional markets. Civil society groups and local associations began to advocate for more equitable resource management, linking environmental conservation to cultural survival.

In this sense, the Niger River in the post-colonial era embodied both continuity and change: it remained a source of livelihood, spirituality, and identity for its peoples, but its role was continuously reshaped by state policies, economic shifts, and global environmental challenges

4.4 Contemporary Significance of the Niger River

In the twenty-first century, the Niger River remains one of West Africa’s most important natural and cultural landmarks. For the Okun, Igala, and Nupe peoples, it is not only a physical resource but also a marker of identity and continuity. However, rapid socio-economic changes, environmental degradation, and shifting political dynamics have redefined its role in contemporary Nigerian society.

5. Economic Opportunities and Challenges

Despite these challenges, the Niger River continues to serve as an engine of economic activity. Fishing, irrigation farming, and riverine transport remain critical livelihoods for thousands of households. With renewed state interest in agricultural diversification, especially after the oil price crashes of the 2010s, the Niger’s fertile floodplains have gained attention for rice and vegetable cultivation (Olayemi 1988). River ports and local trade hubs connect communities to regional markets, ensuring that the Niger retains its role as a corridor of exchange.

Table 1: Irrigation potential in the Niger River basin in Nigeria according to the NWRMP

Region in Niger River Basin	Potential of Public Schemes (ha)	Potential of Fadama Development (ha)	Total Irrigation Potential (ha)
Niger North	146,590	299,000	445,590
Niger Central	183,140	34,000	217,140
Upper Benue	435,430	320,000	755,430
Lower Benue	61,230	140,000	201,230
Niger South	59,120	0	59,120
TOTAL	885,510	793,000	1,678,510

Source FAO (nd)

Table 1 illustrates how the northern geo-political zones benefit from the River Niger through irrigation, significantly enhancing agricultural productivity and food security. Although about 275,000 hectares of public irrigation schemes have been proposed within existing water infrastructure, only 40,540 hectares have been completed and are currently in use.

Traditionally, crop production in fadama areas has relied on rainfall during the wet season and on residual soil moisture after flood recession in the dry season. Fadama is derived from a Hausa term for low-lying or floodplain land and supported by World Bank-assisted projects in Nigeria—covers about 79,000 hectares In locations where shallow groundwater or surface water is readily accessible, simple water-lifting technologies are used for irrigation. The formal Fadama system. In addition, approximately 550,000 hectares of residual fadama cultivation exist within the Niger Basin (Food and Agriculture Organization, n.d.).

At the same time, the push for modern development projects, such as hydroelectric expansion, large-scale irrigation, and dredging, has generated tensions between national economic priorities and local livelihoods. Communities displaced by such projects often receive inadequate compensation, leading to grievances and activism.

5.1 Political and Social Dynamics

The Niger River continues to influence local and national politics. In Kogi State, the Okun and Igala peoples navigate complex relationships over political representation, often invoking cultural ties to the Niger in struggles for recognition and resource allocation. Similarly, in Niger State, the Nupe retain symbolic authority over the middle belt’s riverine corridor but contend with demographic pressures and administrative restructuring. Historically, it facilitated the rise of empires like Mali and Songhai, while modernly it enables regional cooperation through the

Niger Basin Authority (NBA) and provides critical infrastructure like the Kainji Dam

Civil society groups, including youth associations and women's cooperatives, increasingly use the Niger as a rallying point for advocacy, whether against environmental degradation, for improved fishing rights, or for equitable state development policies. These grassroots movements illustrate how the river remains central not only to livelihoods but also to collective political consciousness.

5.2 Environmental Pressures and Climate Change

Climate change has had profound effects on the Niger River basin. Erratic rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, and prolonged dry seasons have disrupted traditional farming and fishing cycles (Adesina, 1977). Water levels in parts of the river fluctuate unpredictably, leading to seasonal flooding in some communities and drought-like conditions in others. These changes threaten food security and increase competition over scarce resources. Pollution from industrial waste, oil exploration, and agricultural runoff further compromises water quality, reducing fish stocks and exposing riparian populations to health hazards (Nwankwo, n.d.). Climate change has also affected the River Niger and this has led to constant flooding which has caused loss of lives, displacements and loss of livelihood. In 2024, more than 1,200 people were killed and 1.2 million displaced in at least 31 out of Nigeria's 36 states, making it one of the country's worst floods in decades. It was also reported that flash floods that ripped through parts of central Nigeria's state of Niger killed at 115, people an emergency services official said on Friday, saying the toll is expected to rise. Ibrahim Audu Hussein, Niger SEMA spokesman said, "We have so far recovered 115 bodies and more are expected to be recovered because the flood came from far distance and washed people into the River Niger. Downstream, bodies are still being recovered" (Adewole and Agency Reporter, 2025).

5.3 Cultural Resilience and Transformation

Culturally, the Niger continues to inspire rituals, festivals, and oral traditions. Igala river-based festivals, Nupe boat regattas, and Okun masquerades highlight the deep symbolic ties between water, fertility, and community life. Even in urbanised contexts, the river features prominently in local memory, songs, and proverbs, serving as a reminder of heritage.

At the same time, modern influences, Christianity, Islam, education, migration, and digital media, re-reshaping these traditions. Younger generations reinterpret river symbolism within contemporary identities, blending ancestral reverence with global religious and cultural practices.

5.4 Regional and International Dimensions

Beyond Nigeria, the Niger River is part of a wider West African system governed by multinational cooperation through the Niger Basin Authority (NBA). Nigeria's participation in the NBA reflects the river's importance for regional integration, environmental management, and peacebuilding among riparian states. However, competing national interests, weak enforcement mechanisms, and resource pressures often limit the effectiveness of such efforts (Okonkwo n. d.).

6. Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, the Niger River remains a space of paradox. It is simultaneously threatened and resilient, exploited yet nurturing, localised yet global in significance. For the Okun, Igala, and Nupe peoples, the river is not merely a geographical feature but a historical companion whose meaning evolves with each era. From precolonial corridors of trade to colonial disruption, from postcolonial modernisation to contemporary struggles with climate and globalisation, the Niger embodies the intersection of continuity and change in Nigerian history.

Notes

¹ Adebola, A. S. (2025, oral interview). Personal communication on Okun trading practices.

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