

RETHINKING THE COLONIALISM THESIS IN NEMBE– OGBIA RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the application of the concept of colonialism in describing historical relations between Nembe and Ogbia communities in the Niger Delta. It argues that the characterization of Nembe economic dominance and military engagements as colonialism reflects a conceptual misapplication rooted in Eurocentric analytical frameworks. Drawing on historical evidence, oral traditions, and theoretical insights from hegemony and postcolonial studies, the paper demonstrates that Nembe influence was characterized by commercial centrality, strategic dominance, and episodic conflict rather than institutionalized colonial rule. The study concludes that the colonialism thesis obscures the complexity of indigenous political systems and calls for a reconceptualization of power relations in precolonial African societies. This reinterpretation contributes to ongoing debates in African historiography by challenging oversimplified analogies between European colonial structures and indigenous African systems of power, trade, and diplomacy.

keywords: Colonialism, Ogbia, Nembe, Niger Delta, Intergroup Relations, Hegemony, Precolonial Africa

Introduction

The study of intergroup relations in precolonial Africa has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly within the broader project of reconstructing indigenous political systems free from the epistemological distortions of colonial historiography. Early European accounts often framed African societies through categories emphasizing disorder, statelessness, or external dependence, marginalizing the complexity of indigenous institutions and modes of interaction. Contemporary historians and political theorists have since sought to recover the internal logics of African societies by interrogating the conceptual tools used to interpret their past. Within the Niger Delta a region defined by its waterways, commercial vitality, and decentralized political formations the relationship between Nembe and Ogbia communities has remained a subject of enduring historiographical debate. Linked through geography, trade, and occasional conflict, these communities developed patterns of interaction shaped by the Atlantic economy, local resource competition, and evolving political authority. While some scholars have interpreted Nembe's economic influence and military expeditions into Ogbia territories as evidence of "indigenous colonialism," such a characterization raises significant conceptual and methodological concerns, inviting scrutiny of both the historical evidence and the analytical frameworks through which it is interpreted.

Statement of the Problem

The persistence and growing acceptance of the "colonialism thesis" in explaining Nembe–Ogbia relations constitutes a significant historiographical and theoretical problem. Historiographically, existing scholarship has tended to privilege interpretations that align with familiar global narratives of domination, even where local evidence suggests alternative explanations. Theoretically, such scholarship reveals the risks of applying concepts derived from European historical experiences to non-European contexts without adequate adaptation or critical reflection. The uncritical deployment of the term "colonialism" equates episodic military incursions and economic leverage with systemic political subjugation, thereby distorting historical realities and obscuring the agency of Ogbia communities as active participants in regional networks of trade and diplomacy. This problem is further compounded by the absence of clear analytical criteria for distinguishing between different forms of power and influence in precolonial settings. Economic dominance, military raiding, and political sovereignty are conceptually distinct phenomena, yet some existing studies collapse them into a single, overly generalized category. The result is a limited analytical clarity that undermines efforts to develop nuanced, context-sensitive interpretations of African history. This study therefore interrogates the validity and applicability of the colonialism thesis in the context of Nembe–Ogbia relations and advances a more theoretically robust and historically grounded framework for understanding their interactions.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by four interrelated objectives:

1. To examine the historical patterns of interaction between Nembe and Ogbia communities, with particular attention to economic exchanges, political relations, and instances of conflict.
2. To evaluate the conceptual adequacy of colonialism as an analytical category for explaining these interactions, drawing on both historical evidence and theoretical insights.

3. To explore alternative conceptual frameworks including regional hegemony, commercial dominance, and localized militarism that may offer more accurate and contextually appropriate interpretations of Nembe–Ogbia relations.
4. To situate Nembe–Ogbia relations within the broader context of intergroup dynamics in the Niger Delta, thereby illuminating both their particularities and their commonalities with wider regional patterns.

Research Questions

In pursuit of these objectives, the study is organized around the following questions:

1. What were the dominant patterns of interaction economic, political, and military between Nembe and Ogbia communities in the precolonial period?
2. To what extent does the concept of colonialism accurately capture the nature of Nembe–Ogbia relations, and what are its conceptual limitations when applied to this context?
3. What alternative analytical frameworks such as regional hegemony, trade dominance, or intermittent militarism more appropriately account for the forms of power and influence that characterized Nembe–Ogbia interactions?
4. How do Nembe–Ogbia relations compare with broader patterns of intergroup dynamics in the Niger Delta, and what does this comparison reveal about the nature of precolonial political authority in the region?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This section situates the study within broader scholarly debates on colonialism, imperialism, and hegemony while advancing an analytical framework grounded in African political thought. It clarifies key concepts, addresses methodological concerns in their application to precolonial African societies, and outlines the theoretical lens guiding the analysis of intergroup relations.

1 Conceptualizing Colonialism: Historical Definitions, Scope, and Limits

Colonialism has been widely defined in classical scholarship as a system of political domination in which one power establishes direct control over another territory, its institutions, and its population. Early European accounts often justified colonial expansion through civilizing narratives, framing it as a moral and developmental enterprise (Said, 1978). This interpretation, however, has been strongly challenged by postcolonial scholarship, which emphasizes the exploitative and violent foundations of colonial rule. Fanon (1963) highlights colonialism's psychological and cultural violence, arguing that it restructures both material conditions and consciousness. Mamdani (1996) further demonstrates that colonial rule in Africa institutionalized a bifurcated state system that separated "citizens" from "subjects," thereby embedding structural inequality into governance.

Contemporary scholars such as Bhabra (2021) and Lowe (2015) argue that colonialism must be understood as constitutive of modern global social and economic systems, rather than as a discrete historical episode. Decolonial scholarship extends this further, treating colonialism as encompassing epistemic domination — the persistence of colonial power through knowledge systems and global hierarchies of authority (Mignolo, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012). Scholars such as Rodney (1972) and Young (2001) similarly emphasize that colonialism in Africa was historically tied to European imperial expansion and capitalist penetration, and is therefore distinct from other forms of interaction such as trade dominance or military superiority. While imperialism denotes broader forms of political or economic domination, colonialism specifically involves settlement, governance, and the long-term structural reorganization of the colonized society (Osterhammel, 2005). Colonialism is thus not merely about power asymmetry; it is about

institutionalized and enduring control, typically imposed by a geographically and culturally distinct external power. This conceptual expansion has, however, generated important debates about analytical precision. Extending the concept beyond its historically grounded features risks what Sartori (1970) terms "conceptual stretching," whereby a term is applied so broadly that its analytical clarity is lost. To guard against this, the literature identifies several core criteria that distinguish colonialism from related but distinct forms of domination: externality, or domination by a foreign or geographically distant power (Fieldhouse, 1982); settlement or administrative implantation through the establishment of governing structures or population presence (Osterhammel, 2005); institutionalized political control through the creation of enduring systems of authority (Young, 2001); economic extraction through the systematic exploitation of resources and labor (Rodney, 1972); cultural transformation through the imposition of language, religion, or social systems (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007); and structural permanence, characterized by sustained rather than episodic domination (Abernethy, 2000). These criteria provide the necessary analytical framework for evaluating claims of colonial relationships in precolonial African contexts, and it is against them that the characterization of Nembe–Ogbia relations as colonial will be assessed in the sections that follow.

Distinctions Between Colonialism, Imperialism, and Hegemony

Clarifying the distinctions between colonialism, imperialism, and hegemony is essential for conceptual accuracy. Imperialism refers broadly to the extension of a state's power and influence over other territories through military, economic, or diplomatic means. It does not necessarily require permanent settlement or direct administrative control. Colonialism, by contrast, is a more specific institutional form of imperialism characterized by direct occupation, territorial administration, and structural reorganization of the colonized society under external authority. It involves the systematic replacement or subordination of indigenous governance structures. Hegemony, as theorized by Gramsci (1971), operates primarily through ideological leadership and cultural consent rather than direct coercion. It reflects the ability of dominant groups to shape norms, values, and belief systems in ways that make their dominance appear natural or legitimate. In contemporary international relations, hegemonic influence may also describe global power asymmetries that function without formal political control. Distinguishing these concepts is particularly important in African historiography, where trade dominance, alliance systems, and military superiority are sometimes mischaracterized as colonialism, despite lacking its defining institutional features.

Conceptual Problems in Applying Colonialism to Precolonial African Societies

A major historiographical challenge lies in the retroactive application of colonial categories to precolonial African political systems. Such an approach risks anachronism by imposing modern European-derived frameworks on societies that operated under fundamentally different logics of authority and interaction. Precolonial African societies were marked by fluid political arrangements, decentralized authority structures, and complex systems of negotiation, trade, and alliance. Ranger (1983) cautions against static representations of African political life, emphasizing its dynamism and adaptability. Similarly, Afigbo (1981) underscores the diversity of indigenous Nigerian political systems, warning against homogenizing interpretations shaped by colonial-era documentation. Osaghae (2006) further notes that colonial analytical categories often obscure indigenous political logics by privileging coercive domination over relational and reciprocal forms of authority. In many cases, what is interpreted as domination may instead reflect shifting balances of power, economic interdependence, or strategic alliance-building. The conceptual difficulty therefore lies in distinguishing between inequality in relations and the

institutionalized system of control characteristic of colonialism. Without this distinction, there is a risk of misreading indigenous African political complexity through an externally imposed conceptual lens.

Theoretical Framework: Power, Authority, and Intergroup Relations in African Political Thought

This study adopts a theoretical framework grounded in African political thought, focusing on the relational nature of power, authority, and intergroup relations. Rather than privileging coercion as the primary form of political organization, African political systems often integrate material, symbolic, and moral dimensions of authority. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) demonstrate that many African societies were governed through decentralized systems in which authority was distributed across kinship networks, age grades, and ritual institutions. Authority in such contexts is sustained not only through force but also through legitimacy, consensus, and cultural recognition. Bayart (2009) further argues that African political formations are characterized by "extraversion," where internal political dynamics are shaped through engagement with external actors in ways that produce complex and adaptive systems of power. This perspective challenges rigid hierarchical models by emphasizing fluidity and negotiation. Additionally, decolonial theorists such as Mignolo (2009) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012) highlight the importance of epistemic autonomy in interpreting African historical experiences, arguing that Western analytical categories often fail to capture indigenous logics of governance and social organization. Bhabra (2021) similarly calls for a rethinking of global social theory that accounts for colonial entanglements without reducing all historical relations to colonial frameworks. Within this framework, intergroup relations are understood as dynamic processes shaped by competition, reciprocity, alliance, and symbolic legitimacy rather than fixed structures of domination. This approach allows for a more nuanced interpretation of historical interactions, particularly in contexts such as Nembe–Ogbia relations, where economic, political, and military engagements cannot be adequately explained through colonial analogies alone.

Interrogating the Colonialism Thesis in Ogbia–Nembe Relations

When applied to the historical interactions between Nembe and Ogbia communities, the colonialism framework reveals significant limitations. While it is historically evident that Nembe exercised military, economic, and political influence over certain Ogbia settlements, particularly during the era of Atlantic trade, these dynamics do not satisfy the defining criteria of colonialism. First, the issue of externality is absent. Nembe and Ogbia are contiguous Niger Delta societies, sharing ecological zones, cultural affinities, and long-standing patterns of interaction. Unlike classical colonial situations involving European powers in Africa, there is no clear distinction between a "metropole" and a "colony" (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Second, there is no evidence of systematic settlement or administrative implantation by Nembe within Ogbia territories. Ogbia communities exercised leadership **over** their societies from within, not externally. Colonialism presupposes the establishment of enduring political institutions or settler communities designed to govern and restructure the subject population (Osterhammel, 2005). In the Ogbia–Nembe case, interactions appear to have been episodic and strategic, rather than institutionalized. Third, Nembe's influence did not amount to comprehensive institutional control over Ogbia society. While instances of tribute, political interference, or leadership imposition may have occurred, such practices are better understood within the framework of precolonial African interstate relations, where dominance and subordination were fluid and often negotiated (Afigbo, 1981). Fourth, there is limited evidence of systematic economic extraction or cultural transformation in the colonial sense. Although Nembe's prominence in regional trade networks may have created economic

dependencies, this does not equate to the structured exploitation characteristic of colonial economies (Rodney, 1972). Similarly, there is no indication of a sustained effort to erase or replace Ogbia cultural institutions. Finally, the relationship lacks the structural permanence that defines colonial systems. Nembe–Ogbia interactions were shaped by shifting political and economic circumstances rather than entrenched and self-sustaining institutional arrangements.

Literature Review

Scholarly Interpretations of Nembe–Ogbia Relations

Scholarship on Nembe–Ogbia relations in the Niger Delta has generally been shaped by broader debates on intergroup interaction, trade networks, and precolonial political economy. Early historical accounts tend to emphasize patterns of commercial exchange, especially in palm produce, fish, and salt, which linked coastal Nembe communities with inland Ogbia settlements (Alagoa, 1970). In this interpretation, relations are framed as largely symbiotic, characterized by reciprocity and interdependence rather than domination. However, revisionist historiography has challenged this view by highlighting episodes of military raids, tribute extraction, and political interference by Nembe intermediaries in Ogbia communities. Scholars such as Okoro (2005) argue that these interactions sometimes assumed coercive dimensions, particularly during periods of intensified Atlantic trade competition. From this perspective, Nembe influence is interpreted as a form of localized hegemonic expansion within the Niger Delta's complex political economy. Despite these divergent interpretations, most scholars agree that Nembe–Ogbia relations cannot be reduced to a single explanatory framework, as they were historically fluid, oscillating between cooperation and conflict depending on economic and strategic conditions (Dike, 1956).

The Colonialism Thesis in Niger Delta Historiography

A more controversial strand of scholarship applies the concept of "colonialism" to describe Nembe expansionist activities in the Ogbia hinterland. Proponents of this thesis argue that Nembe elites exercised forms of political and economic control over certain inland communities through military superiority and control of trade routes (Alagoa, 1970; Jones, 1963). In this reading, Nembe intermediaries are sometimes portrayed as agents of "internal colonialism," extracting resources and imposing tribute systems analogous to European colonial structures. This interpretation draws loosely on dependency theory and world-systems approaches, which conceptualize unequal exchange relations as forms of domination (Amin, 1976). However, applying the term "colonialism" to precolonial African intergroup relations remains highly contested. Critics argue that such usage risks anachronism by projecting European historical categories onto fundamentally different indigenous political formations (Afigbo, 1987). Colonialism, in its classical sense, involves formal sovereignty, territorial annexation, and institutionalized foreign rule, conditions not fully applicable to Nembe–Ogbia interactions.

Critiques and Alternative Interpretations in Existing Scholarship

A growing body of scholarship challenges the colonialism thesis by reframing Nembe–Ogbia relations within indigenous African political dynamics rather than imported analytical categories. Scholars such as Falola (2001) and Ekeh (1975) emphasize the importance of distinguishing between precolonial hegemonic influence and colonial domination, arguing that the former lacked the bureaucratic and racialized structures characteristic of European colonialism. Alternative interpretations instead describe Nembe–Ogbia relations as forms of networked power, commercial intermediation, or segmentary state interaction, where authority was decentralized and continuously negotiated. From this perspective, conflict and coercion are understood as part of competitive trade politics rather than colonial imposition. Furthermore, oral traditions collected in Niger Delta communities often depict Nembe traders as both allies and rivals rather than foreign

occupiers, reinforcing the argument that these relations were embedded in indigenous systems of exchange and diplomacy rather than external domination (Alagoa, 1970).

There is no strong empirical evidence that Nembe systematically appointed kings over Ogbia communities. Ogbia political systems developed internally, not through Nembe political imposition. The idea that Nembe appointed kings in Ogbia is not historically established as a general practice. At most, Nembe cultural influence may have affected certain communities indirectly due to proximity, but Ogbia communities largely retained their political independence and indigenous systems of leadership selection. The notion of colonialism is therefore misapplied here, since colonialism is defined by the direct takeover of the administrative machinery of a territory by officials of an external power.

Identified Gaps in the Literature

Despite extensive scholarship on Niger Delta intergroup relations, several gaps remain evident. First, there is a persistent conceptual ambiguity in the use of "colonialism," with some studies failing to distinguish clearly between coercive trade influence and formal colonial rule. Second, much of the existing literature relies heavily on either colonial archival sources or broad theoretical generalizations, with limited integration of systematic oral historical evidence from Ogbia communities themselves. This creates an imbalance in source representation and interpretation. Third, there is a lack of comparative micro-historical analysis that situates Nembe–Ogbia relations alongside similar Niger Delta intergroup systems, such as Bonny–Andoni or Kalabari–Ijo hinterland relations. Such comparison would help clarify whether Nembe–Ogbia dynamics were exceptional or part of broader regional patterns. Finally, there is limited engagement with contemporary historiographical debates on internal African agency, which emphasize African actors as autonomous historical agents rather than passive subjects of domination (Cooper, 2005). These gaps justify a re-examination of the colonialism thesis and support the need for a more nuanced conceptual framework.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design aimed at critically re-evaluating the colonialism thesis in Nembe–Ogbia relations. The approach combines historical analysis with oral tradition methodology to reconstruct a more balanced and contextually grounded interpretation of intergroup relations in the Niger Delta. Qualitative historical research is particularly suited to this inquiry because it allows for the interrogation of meaning, context, and process rather than the quantification of social phenomena. By integrating oral tradition methodology with a systematic review of existing scholarly literature and colonial administrative records, the study is positioned to recover dimensions of Nembe–Ogbia relations that purely text-based approaches may overlook. This methodological pluralism reflects a broader commitment within African historiography to treating oral sources as legitimate and analytically rigorous forms of historical evidence (Vansina, 1985). Primary data were generated through oral interviews conducted between January and March 2026 in selected communities within the Nembe and Ogbia areas. Fieldwork was carried out across four communities: Okoroma in Nembe, and Otuoke, Otuaba, and Ogbia Town in Ogbia. Three informants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy that prioritizes the depth and relevance of information over statistical representativeness. This approach is appropriate for historical research of this nature, where specialized knowledge held by specific individuals is of greater analytical value than a large but undifferentiated sample. The informants Akpufu Loveday, Laderi G., and Michael Joseph are community elders whose knowledge of local history, intergroup relations, and oral traditions made them particularly valuable sources. Interviews were conducted in both English and Ogbia, depending on the

informant's preference and linguistic comfort. As a speaker of Ogbia, the researcher conducted and translated responses from Ogbia-language interviews directly, thereby minimizing the distortions that can arise from third-party translation and ensuring fidelity to the informants' original expressions.

Secondary data were drawn from existing scholarly literature on Niger Delta history, precolonial African political systems, and the theoretical literature on colonialism and intergroup relations. These sources provided the conceptual and comparative framework within which the primary oral data were interpreted and evaluated. Published works by historians of the Niger Delta, including those drawing on earlier oral tradition research, were consulted alongside theoretical texts in African political history and postcolonial studies. Data analysis followed a thematic and interpretive approach, in which oral accounts and secondary materials were examined for recurring patterns, points of convergence, and areas of tension. The findings were then evaluated against the six defining criteria of colonialism identified in the conceptual framework externality, settlement, institutional control, economic extraction, cultural transformation, and structural permanence to assess the validity of the colonialism thesis as applied to Nembe–Ogbia relations.

Theoretical analysis is guided by postcolonial historiography and indigenous African political thought, which emphasize contextual interpretation over the imposition of external analytical categories. Ethical considerations include informed consent from oral informants, respect for cultural sensitivities, and accurate representation of community narratives.

Geographical Background of Nembe and Ogbia

Geographical Background of Nembe

Nembe is geographically located in Bayelsa State, in the central part of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. It is bounded on the east by Akukutoru and Abua Odual local government areas of Rivers State, and at the north and west by Ogbia local government area. The area is characterized by rivulets, creeks, creeklets, and canals. At the Brass axis it is surrounded by the sea. The River Niger connects to the sea through many interconnected rivers and creeks, such as Rivers Nun, St. Nicholas, and St. Bartholomew. Another significant feature of the area is the rich mangrove forest. Climatic conditions of the area include high temperature, high humidity, and heavy rainfall. Thus, the area experiences both the wet (rainy) and dry seasons (Ama-Ogbari, 2014). Nembe was one of the prominent city-states in the Niger Delta during the pre-colonial period. Like other city-states, Nembe pursued regional influence through a combination of diplomacy and warfare. They engaged in military expeditions into neighboring territories, purposely to assert political authority, enforcing tributary relationships and securing loyalty from surrounding communities. Such actions were typical of decentralized but competitive political systems in the Delta (Alagoa, 1972; Horton, 1969). The intention was to control the waterways and strategic routes linking Nembe to the hinterland (Ogbia) to prevent Europeans from having direct contact with the Ogbia people. In the process, conflicts arose when Ogbia people resisted Nembe attempts to dominate key transit routes (Dike, 1956; Jones, 1963).

Geographical Background of Ogbia

Ogbia is one of the sub-Ijaw ethnic groups, located in Bayelsa State, in the central part of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. It occupies a land mass of about five thousand (5,000) square kilometers. It is bounded by Engene to the north, Epie-Attisa to the northwest, Odual to the east, and Nembe to the south. Ogbia, like any other society in the Niger Delta, is characterized by rivulets, creeks, and rivers, namely Kolo Creek, Ekoli River, Oobio Creek, and Agboin River, which leads to Oluasiri. The climatic condition of the area affects the vegetation; hence the land is heavily clothed with the evergreen forest of the tropics, depicting a typical equatorial ecology. The

rainforest zone of the area gives rise to the abundance of big trees and thick forest, mixed with a small area of mangrove forest, especially around Ogbia main town and the Akipilai axis. According to M. O. Okpara (2009), the topography of the area conditioned the people to engage in agriculture, though on a subsistence level. They produce farm products such as cocoyam, plantain, cassava, rice, and sugarcane. Palm harvesting is another prominent occupation of the Ogbia people because of the abundance of palm trees in their rainforest. Ogbia was one of the major suppliers of palm oil as well as kernel during the era of legitimate trade. The establishment of the oil mill at Anyama Ogbia in 1955 gave credence to the fact that Ogbia people participated actively in the oil palm boom in the nineteenth century (Okpara, 2009). Due to the proximity of Ogbia and Nembe, they have had a robust socio-economic and political relationship from the pre-colonial era to the contemporary period.

Historical Context of Nembe–Ogbia Relations

The historical relationship between the Nembe and Ogbia peoples of the Niger Delta must be situated within the broader dynamics of precolonial intergroup relations in the region. These interactions were shaped by trade, migration, ecological adaptation, and evolving political structures rather than fixed colonial hierarchies. Recent historiography emphasizes that Niger Delta societies were characterized by fluid networks of exchange and competition rather than rigid systems of domination (Alagoa, 2005; Dike, 1956).

Origins and Early Contact

Early contact between the Nembe (Brass) and Ogbia communities is generally traced to patterns of migration, riverine settlement expansion, and trade routes along the Brass River and its tributaries. The Nembe, as a prominent Ijo-speaking coastal group, developed early maritime and commercial capacities that facilitated interaction with hinterland communities such as the Ogbia. Oral traditions suggest that these contacts were initially peaceful, centered on barter trade involving fish, salt, palm produce, and forest goods. Scholarly reconstructions indicate that precolonial Niger Delta societies operated within interconnected economic zones rather than isolated ethnic compartments (Jones, 1963; Alagoa, 2005). As such, early Nembe–Ogbia relations are best understood as part of a wider regional trading system rather than a linear narrative of domination or subordination.

Political Organization of Nembe and Ogbia Societies

The Nembe polity developed a centralized kingship system under the Amanyanabo, supported by structured councils of chiefs and war leaders. This political organization enabled Nembe to coordinate trade, naval expeditions, and external relations across the coastal waterways. The strength of Nembe political authority was closely linked to its economic position in the palm oil and slave trade during the precolonial and early contact periods (Alagoa, 2005). In contrast, Ogbia political organization was more decentralized, consisting of autonomous communities governed by councils of elders, age grades, and lineage heads. Authority was dispersed, and decision-making was largely consensual. This structural difference has sometimes been misinterpreted in earlier scholarship as evidence of hierarchical domination, rather than as variation in indigenous governance systems (Dike, 1956; Horton, 1970).

A more balanced interpretation suggests that both systems were adaptive responses to ecological and economic conditions rather than inherently superior or inferior forms of political organization. As observed by Chief Akpufu Gabriel Loveday, a community elder from Otuoke/Otuogori in Ogbia, the Nembe military expeditions targeted only a few communities, particularly those along the Ekole River and Oloibiri clan, while communities along the Kolo Creek axis remained unaffected (personal communication, March 30, 2026). This testimony

reinforces the argument that it is both inappropriate and historically misleading to conclude that Ogbia was colonized by Nembe on the basis of what were episodic and geographically limited military incursions.

Patterns of Interaction in the Precolonial Period

Precolonial Nembe–Ogbia interactions were multidimensional, encompassing trade, alliance formation, competition, and occasional conflict. Trade relations were particularly significant, with Nembe functioning as intermediaries between coastal European commerce and inland producers. Ogbia communities supplied agricultural produce and forest commodities, integrating them into wider exchange networks. At the same time, competition over trade routes and economic influence occasionally generated tensions. However, these should be understood within the broader context of precolonial African interstate relations, where shifting alliances and conflicts were common features of political economy (Jones, 1963; Alagoa, 2005). Importantly, recent scholarship cautions against interpreting these interactions through the lens of European colonial categories such as "colonialism" or "imperialism," which may obscure the complexity and reciprocity of indigenous systems (Horton, 1970; Alagoa, 2005).

Economic and Political Interactions: The Middleman Role of Nembe in Regional Commerce

The economic history of the Niger Delta has long been shaped by complex systems of exchange, indigenous state formation, and adaptive responses to both intra-African and Atlantic commercial pressures. Within this context, the Nembe (Brass) kingdom occupies a central position as one of the most influential coastal trading polities. Its historical significance lies not only in its participation in regional commerce but also in its structural role as a mediator between inland producers and external markets, particularly European merchants during the Atlantic trade era. Scholarly literature on Niger Delta historiography has emphasized the importance of intermediary states in shaping patterns of trade, authority, and regional diplomacy (Alagoa, 1970; Dike, 1956). However, interpretations of Nembe's economic influence have sometimes oscillated between viewing it as a benign facilitator of trade and framing it as a coercive regional hegemon. This section argues that Nembe's middleman role was neither purely exploitative nor simply cooperative but should be understood as a dynamic and adaptive system of economic and political negotiation shaped by geography, resource distribution, and shifting external demands.

Trade Networks and Economic Interdependence

Trade in the precolonial Niger Delta was organized through a highly sophisticated network of waterways that linked coastal states with hinterland communities. Nembe's strategic location along the Brass River system enabled it to function as a crucial node in this network. The economy of the region was therefore not fragmented but deeply interconnected through riverine exchange systems that facilitated the movement of goods, people, and ideas (Horton, 1969). The major commodities circulating within these networks included palm oil, ivory, dried fish, timber, salt, and forest products from inland producers, while European traders introduced textiles, guns, beads, and alcoholic beverages. The exchange process was mediated by indigenous trading houses that controlled access to coastal ports and inland routes. These houses operated not only as economic units but also as political and military institutions responsible for regulating trade security and enforcing contracts. A key feature of this system was mutual dependence. Inland groups such as the Ogbia, Ekpeye, and other hinterland producers relied on Nembe middlemen to access Atlantic markets, while Nembe depended on inland suppliers for the steady flow of export commodities. This interdependence complicates any simplistic interpretation of domination, as it reveals a system in which power was distributed across multiple actors, each constrained and enabled by geographic and economic realities (Ikime, 1977). Furthermore, canoe house institutions

served as the backbone of this system. These corporate kinship-based structures organized labor, trade, and military protection. The canoe houses were competitive yet interdependent, often forming alliances to secure trade routes while simultaneously competing for market dominance. This dual structure of cooperation and competition created a resilient but tension-filled commercial system.

The Middleman Role of Nembe in Regional Commerce

The "middleman system" in Niger Delta historiography refers to the intermediary position occupied by coastal polities that controlled access between European merchants and inland producers. Nembe's role within this structure was both strategic and institutional. Geographically, Nembe was positioned advantageously along navigable waterways that served as the primary channels for commerce. However, geography alone does not explain its dominance. Rather, Nembe's political organization, especially the canoe house system, enabled it to regulate trade flows, enforce commercial agreements, and maintain security along trade routes. European traders, particularly during the nineteenth century, were largely restricted to coastal stations due to environmental constraints and unfamiliarity with inland river systems. This limitation necessitated reliance on indigenous intermediaries who possessed navigational knowledge and political authority. As a result, Nembe traders acted as gatekeepers, determining the timing, pricing, and distribution of goods entering and leaving the hinterland (Naanen, 1993). This intermediary position allowed Nembe elites to accumulate wealth and reinforce political authority. Control over trade translated directly into political influence, as leading canoe house heads became both economic managers and political decision-makers. The integration of commerce and governance is a defining characteristic of Niger Delta political economy. However, the middleman role should not be misinterpreted as evidence of colonial-like domination over inland groups. Rather, it reflected a negotiated system of exchange embedded in indigenous institutions. Power in this system was relational and contingent, often shifting depending on market conditions, alliances, and external pressures (Afigbo, 1987).

By the late nineteenth century, however, the emergence of European firms seeking direct access to inland producers began to weaken the intermediary position of Nembe. This shift marked the beginning of structural changes in regional commerce, leading to the gradual erosion of indigenous trade monopolies.

Resource Control and Economic Influence

Economic power in Nembe was fundamentally rooted in control over natural resources and trade commodities. The Niger Delta's ecological environment provided abundant resources, particularly palm produce, fish, and timber, which became central to the Atlantic economy. During the nineteenth-century palm oil boom, demand from European industrial economies significantly increased the value of Niger Delta exports. Nembe elites capitalized on this demand by controlling access to production zones and regulating trade distribution channels. Resource control was exercised through both formal and informal institutions, including customary land rights, riverine access rules, and canoe house authority structures (Alagoa, 1970). Control over productive zones was not merely economic but also political. Chiefs and canoe house leaders exercised jurisdiction over fishing grounds, forest areas, and trading depots. These rights were enforced through customary law and, when necessary, through coercive means such as armed canoe expeditions.

Nevertheless, resource control was never absolute. Inland producers retained significant autonomy over production processes, while coastal middlemen depended on their cooperation for supply continuity. This reinforces the argument that economic power in the Niger Delta was decentralized and negotiated rather than strictly hierarchical. According to Laderi G. (personal

communication, March 30, 2026): "During the nineteenth century, when the Nembe people were deeply involved in the middleman role in the palm oil business, some Ogbia people were also taking their products directly to Akassa for sale. The military expeditions of the Nembe people did not confine the Ogbia people to trade within their locality." The increasing penetration of European commercial firms in the late nineteenth century disrupted this balance. Firms such as the Royal Niger Company increasingly bypassed indigenous intermediaries by establishing direct procurement systems inland. This process reduced Nembe's control over trade flows and contributed to the restructuring of regional economic hierarchies (Ikime, 1977).

Political Interactions and Regional Dynamics

In Nembe society, economic and political authority were deeply intertwined. The canoe house system functioned as a hybrid institution combining economic enterprise, military organization, and political governance. Leadership positions within canoe houses conferred both economic privileges and political authority, including dispute resolution, alliance formation, and war mobilization. Regional interactions between Nembe and neighboring communities were characterized by a fluid mix of cooperation, competition, and conflict. Alliances were often formed to secure trade routes or to gain advantage in commercial negotiations, while conflicts emerged over access to resources and market control. These interactions were governed not by colonial logic but by indigenous systems of diplomacy, reciprocity, and strategic bargaining.

It is important to emphasize that precolonial political economy in the Niger Delta was not anarchic but institutionally structured. Rules governing trade, conflict resolution, and alliance formation were embedded in customary norms and enforced through established political institutions. The arrival of British colonial rule fundamentally altered these dynamics. Colonial authorities sought to dismantle indigenous trading systems and replace them with centralized administrative structures and European-controlled commerce. This process undermined the autonomy of canoe house institutions and reconfigured regional power relations in favor of colonial economic interests (Dike, 1956).

Theoretical Implications: Rethinking Middleman Systems

From a political economy perspective, Nembe's role can be better understood through frameworks that emphasize decentralized power and negotiated authority. Dependency theory, while useful in analyzing colonial-era transformations, is less effective in explaining precolonial trade systems characterized by mutual dependence and indigenous institutional control. Instead, a relational model of power is more appropriate. In this model, authority is not fixed but emerges through interaction among multiple actors within a shared economic system. Nembe's middleman position was therefore not a static dominance structure but a shifting role shaped by geography, market demand, and institutional adaptation. This perspective challenges interpretations that describe intra-African trade dominance in terms of "colonialism," a concept historically associated with external territorial conquest and administrative control. Nembe's influence, while significant, operated within indigenous frameworks that lacked the structural features of colonial rule. According to Michael Joseph (personal communication, March 28, 2026): "There has never been a time that a king was either appointed for his community, Otuabo, by Nembe people, nor had an external person administer the affairs of their community."

Military Engagements and Power Relations

Military engagements between Nembe and Ogbia communities formed a significant dimension of precolonial Niger Delta intergroup relations. These interactions were not merely episodic outbursts of violence but were embedded within broader structures of political economy, trade competition, ecological adaptation, and shifting regional alliances. Consequently, military

encounters in this context must be understood as instruments of negotiation, regulation, and influence within a fluid frontier system rather than expressions of fixed territorial conquest or colonial domination (Alagoa, 1970; Jones, 1963). The historiography of Niger Delta politics has increasingly moved away from rigid interpretations of warfare as imperial expansion, instead emphasizing the interconnectedness of commerce and conflict. In this regard, Nembe–Ogbia relations provide a useful case for examining how military power operated alongside trade and diplomacy to shape regional hierarchies and autonomy structures.

Nature and Causes of Military Encounters

Military encounters between Nembe (Brass) and Ogbia communities were largely driven by economic and strategic considerations. The Niger Delta environment, characterized by dense waterways and resource-rich hinterlands, encouraged the development of interdependent yet competitive political systems. Nembe's position as a coastal trading state enabled it to act as an intermediary between European merchants and inland producers, thereby increasing its economic leverage over hinterland communities such as Ogbia (Dike, 1956). One of the primary causes of military encounters was competition over trade routes and access to commodities such as palm oil, kernels, fish, and forest products. As Atlantic trade expanded, control over inland supply chains became increasingly important. Disputes often emerged when Ogbia communities sought to bypass Nembe intermediaries or renegotiate trade terms, prompting punitive expeditions or coercive displays of force. In addition to economic motivations, political legitimacy also played a role in military encounters. Leadership authority in Nembe was partly reinforced through the ability to project military strength and secure compliance from trading partners. However, such authority was not absolute; it was continuously contested and renegotiated through diplomacy, alliance-building, and resistance from Ogbia settlements. Environmental pressures further shaped the frequency and nature of conflict. Seasonal fluctuations in resources and the mobility afforded by waterways created opportunities for both cooperation and confrontation. Thus, military encounters were often situational rather than continuous, reflecting the adaptive strategies of both societies within a shared ecological space (Alagoa, 1970).

Warfare, Raiding, and Strategic Interests

Warfare in the Nembe–Ogbia region was predominantly characterized by mobility-based operations, including canoe warfare, raiding expeditions, and targeted punitive attacks. The creeks and riverine networks of the Niger Delta facilitated rapid movement, enabling forces to strike quickly and withdraw before sustained counterattacks could be organized. Raiding served multiple strategic purposes. Economically, raids were used to secure goods, disrupt rival trade networks, and enforce compliance with established trading norms. Politically, they functioned as demonstrations of power intended to reinforce Nembe's status within regional hierarchies. However, these raids were rarely aimed at permanent territorial occupation. Instead, they reflected a logic of influence and control that prioritized access over annexation. Ogbia communities, for their part, developed adaptive defensive strategies that included dispersal into difficult terrain, formation of inter-village alliances, and reliance on ecological knowledge of inland waterways. These strategies reduced vulnerability to sustained conquest and ensured that resistance remained a viable option. Strategic interests in warfare were also linked to broader Atlantic commercial dynamics. As European demand for palm produce intensified in the nineteenth century, competition over supply chains became more pronounced. Nembe's intermediary position meant that it had both incentives and opportunities to regulate inland production flows, sometimes through coercive means. However, such regulation was always constrained by the autonomy and resilience of hinterland producers. This pattern aligns with broader interpretations of Niger Delta

warfare as "trade-centered conflict systems," where violence functioned as an extension of commercial negotiation rather than a separate sphere of political action (Jones, 1963; Horton, 1969).

Assessing Control, Resistance, and Autonomy

The question of control in Nembe–Ogbia relations has generated considerable historiographical debate. Earlier interpretations tended to frame Nembe influence over Ogbia in hierarchical terms, suggesting a form of domination akin to proto-colonial control. However, more recent scholarship emphasizes the fragmented, negotiated, and situational nature of such influence. Rather than direct administrative rule, Nembe's power over Ogbia areas was primarily exercised through economic leverage, intermittent military pressure, and control over key trade nodes. This form of influence was uneven and varied across time and space, depending on shifting alliances, market conditions, and local resistance. Ogbia communities maintained significant degrees of internal autonomy. Local political institutions continued to function independently, and decision-making processes were largely preserved within community structures. Even in periods of heightened conflict, Ogbia groups were able to negotiate terms of engagement, withdraw cooperation, or realign with alternative trading partners when necessary. Resistance to Nembe influence took both active and passive forms. Active resistance included armed confrontation, evasion of trade routes, and alliance formation with other inland groups. Passive resistance manifested in delayed trade cooperation, manipulation of supply chains, and selective engagement with coastal intermediaries.

These patterns indicate that power in the Nembe–Ogbia system was not unidirectional but relational. Influence depended on continuous negotiation rather than permanent subjugation. This supports a broader theoretical shift in African historiography that rejects rigid colonial categories in favor of more flexible models of "negotiated sovereignty" and "frontier autonomy" (Alagoa, 1970; Korieh, 2010). In this sense, military engagements should be interpreted not as evidence of structural colonial domination but as one component of a wider system of political and economic interaction in which both Nembe and Ogbia actors exercised agency within constrained but dynamic conditions.

Reassessing the Colonialism Thesis

This section critically evaluates the colonialism thesis as applied to Nembe–Ogbia relations in precolonial Niger Delta historiography. It interrogates the analytical foundations of the argument, its explanatory strengths, and its conceptual limitations, particularly its tendency to impose externally derived categories on indigenous African socio-political systems.

Arguments Supporting the Colonial Interpretation

Scholars who advance the colonialism thesis argue that Nembe's historical interactions with Ogbia communities reflect patterns of domination that are structurally comparable to colonial relations. Central to this interpretation is the assertion that Nembe occupied a dominant position within regional trade networks, particularly in the palm oil and slave economies, which enabled it to regulate access to European merchants and control the flow of goods and prices in ways that disadvantaged hinterland communities such as Ogbia (Alagoa, 1970).

In addition to economic leverage, proponents emphasize the role of military power in sustaining Nembe's regional influence. Raiding activities, punitive expeditions, and coercive enforcement of trade obligations are interpreted as instruments of domination rather than episodic intergroup conflicts. From this perspective, repeated military pressure on Ogbia settlements is viewed as evidence of sustained structural subordination.

Furthermore, the thesis highlights patterns of economic dependency. Ogbia communities are portrayed as increasingly reliant on Nembe-controlled trade routes and coastal access, thereby producing asymmetrical exchange relations that mirror colonial economic hierarchies. Taken together, these arguments construct a framework in which Nembe is positioned as a regional hegemonic power exercising control over subordinate hinterland societies.

Conceptual and Historical Limitations of the Thesis

Despite its interpretive appeal, the colonialism thesis is limited by significant conceptual and historical inconsistencies. At a definitional level, colonialism refers to a historically specific system involving external conquest, sustained administrative occupation, and institutional restructuring under the authority of a foreign metropolitan power. Nembe–Ogbia relations do not satisfy these criteria, as both societies existed within indigenous political and cultural frameworks without external sovereign imposition. The thesis also conflates economic dominance with colonial rule. While Nembe may have exercised considerable influence within regional trade networks, such influence does not equate to formal political sovereignty over Ogbia communities. Precolonial economic relations in the Niger Delta were often characterized by reciprocity, negotiation, and shifting alliances rather than rigid, permanent hierarchies (Dike, 1956).

Moreover, the colonial interpretation tends to project modern categories of domination onto fluid and situational historical interactions. Military engagements, for example, are often interpreted as evidence of systematic subjugation, whereas they may more accurately reflect localized conflicts over trade routes, competition for resources, or retaliatory violence. Finally, the thesis underestimates the role of indigenous legitimacy structures. Nembe authority was embedded in local institutions, kinship networks, and ritual-political systems rather than externally imposed administrative frameworks. This fundamentally distinguishes it from colonial regimes, which derive authority from external metropolitan centers.

Misapplication of Colonial Categories to Indigenous Systems

A critical methodological issue in the colonialism thesis is the misapplication of colonial analytical categories to indigenous African political formations. This results in conceptual distortion, where historically specific European experiences are generalized to contexts that do not share their structural characteristics.

In the case of Nembe–Ogbia relations, applying the colonial label obscures the decentralized and negotiated nature of precolonial power in the Niger Delta. Authority was not uniformly centralized but was instead dispersed across overlapping networks of trade, kinship, and alliance. Influence fluctuated depending on economic conditions, political alliances, and environmental factors, rather than being fixed in a permanent hierarchical order. Furthermore, the colonial framing risks reproducing Eurocentric historiographical assumptions by implicitly treating African political systems as incomplete approximations of European state formation. This undermines efforts within African historiography to develop context-specific conceptual tools capable of capturing indigenous political complexity. A more analytically precise interpretation would conceptualize Nembe's position in terms of regional economic hegemony or trade-based influence rather than colonial domination. Such frameworks preserve the recognition of power asymmetries while avoiding the conceptual overreach associated with the colonialism thesis.

Alternative Analytical Frameworks

The interpretation of intergroup relations in the Niger Delta, particularly between Nembe and Ogbia, has often been constrained by conceptual frameworks that overemphasize rigid hierarchy and understate the fluidity of indigenous political organization. Earlier historiographical readings sometimes rely on "colonialism" as an explanatory category, thereby projecting European

imperial structures onto African contexts where authority, influence, and diplomacy were often more decentralized and negotiable. While it is undeniable that asymmetries of power existed between coastal trading polities and inland communities, such asymmetries do not automatically constitute colonial domination in the historical or theoretical sense (Alagoa, 1970; Horton, 1969). To address these limitations, this section examines alternative analytical frameworks that better capture the complexity of Nembe–Ogbia relations. These include hegemony and sphere of influence models, tributary and alliance-based interpretations, and indigenous conceptions of power and diplomacy. Each framework contributes to a more nuanced reading of precolonial Niger Delta political economy by moving beyond binary assumptions of domination and resistance.

Hegemony and Sphere of Influence Models

The concept of hegemony provides a flexible analytical tool for understanding asymmetrical relations without equating them with colonial rule. In international relations theory, hegemony refers to a system in which a dominant actor exercises leadership over others through a combination of coercion, material advantage, institutional control, and ideological consent, rather than direct territorial administration (Cox, 1981; Gilpin, 1981). Unlike colonialism, hegemony does not necessarily involve the abolition of subordinate political systems; instead, it operates through influence, negotiation, and dependency structures. Applied to precolonial Niger Delta systems, this model helps explain how city-states such as Nembe could exercise regional influence through control of trade routes, riverine navigation, and brokerage networks linking inland producers to Atlantic commerce (Alagoa, 1970; Jones, 1963). The economic organization of the Niger Delta was fundamentally based on intermediated trade, which gave coastal polities leverage over access to external markets. This form of influence was often economic rather than administrative, and it fluctuated depending on trade conditions and shifting alliances. Closely related is the sphere of influence model, which conceptualizes power as spatially uneven and dynamically negotiated. Rather than fixed territorial sovereignty, political authority is understood as operating across gradients of control. Within this framework, Nembe influence over Ogbia communities may have varied across time and geography, particularly along trade routes and market nodes. Such variability is consistent with the decentralized and networked structure of Niger Delta political organization, where authority was exercised through nodes of commerce rather than centralized bureaucratic systems (Horton, 1969; Dike, 1956).

Tributary and Alliance-Based Interpretations

The tributary model offers another interpretive lens that emphasizes negotiated hierarchy rather than imposed domination. In tributary systems, subordinate groups may acknowledge the symbolic or political superiority of a stronger polity through tribute, gifts, or ceremonial recognition in exchange for protection, trade access, or political incorporation (Subrahmanyam, 1997). Importantly, such relationships do not necessarily imply loss of autonomy; rather, they reflect structured reciprocity within a broader regional order. When applied to Nembe–Ogbia relations, this framework suggests that certain forms of obligation or exchange should not be hastily interpreted as colonial subjugation. Instead, they may reflect participation in a wider system of economic interdependence characteristic of the Niger Delta's trade-based political economy (Jones, 1963; Alagoa, 1970). Tribute-like exchanges, where they existed, may have functioned as mechanisms for regulating trade relations, affirming political recognition, or securing access to markets. Alliance-based interpretations further complicate rigid hierarchical readings by emphasizing flexibility, pragmatism, and mutual interest. Alliances in precolonial African contexts were often situational, formed in response to external threats, economic opportunities, or shifting power balances (Thornton, 1998). Such alliances could include mutual defense arrangements,

intermarriage between elite families, or coordinated trade agreements. For Nembe and Ogbia, this perspective highlights the possibility that interaction was not uniformly conflictual or hierarchical but instead characterized by cycles of cooperation and competition. Economic interdependence in the Niger Delta encouraged negotiation rather than permanent domination, as access to trade routes and external markets depended on collaboration among multiple actors (Jones, 1963; Horton, 1969).

Indigenous Conceptions of Power and Diplomacy

A more foundational critique of external analytical frameworks lies in their limited engagement with indigenous African epistemologies of power and authority. In many African political traditions, authority is not conceptualized as absolute sovereignty but as relational, distributed, and grounded in legitimacy derived from social recognition, spiritual sanction, and economic reciprocity (Mbembe, 2001; Ayittey, 1992).

In the Niger Delta, political organization was deeply embedded in networks of kinship, trade guilds, ritual institutions, and age-grade systems. These structures shaped how authority was exercised and legitimized. Leadership was not solely coercive but performative, requiring continuous reaffirmation through exchange, mediation, and ritual observance. This reflects a conception of power as processual rather than static. Diplomacy within this indigenous framework extended beyond formal interstate relations. It involved intermediaries such as trade brokers, emissaries, and ritual specialists who facilitated communication between communities. These actors played a central role in sustaining intergroup relations and managing conflict, often operating within overlapping economic and political networks (Alagoa, 1970; Horton, 1969).

From this perspective, Nembe–Ogbia relations are better understood as part of a broader diplomatic ecology rather than a binary system of domination and resistance. Authority was continuously negotiated through economic exchange, symbolic recognition, and relational practices rather than imposed through centralized control. This aligns with broader scholarship emphasizing the relational and decentralized nature of African political systems (Mbembe, 2001; Ayittey, 1992). In sum, these alternative analytical frameworks collectively challenge reductionist interpretations of Nembe–Ogbia relations as colonial in nature. The hegemony and sphere of influence models highlight the spatially differentiated and non-territorial nature of power (Cox, 1981; Gilpin, 1981). Tributary and alliance-based approaches emphasize negotiated hierarchy and strategic cooperation (Subrahmanyam, 1997; Thornton, 1998). Indigenous conceptions of power and diplomacy, meanwhile, foreground African epistemologies that understand authority as relational, performative, and continuously reproduced through interaction (Mbembe, 2001; Ayittey, 1992). Taken together, these frameworks support a more nuanced historiographical position: that Nembe–Ogbia relations were not simply expressions of colonial domination, but rather complex, adaptive, and multidimensional systems of interaction shaped by economics, diplomacy, ecology, and indigenous political logic (Alagoa, 1970; Horton, 1969; Jones, 1963).

Discussion

Power Dynamics Without Colonial Structure

Recent scholarship on the Niger Delta increasingly emphasizes that precolonial power relations cannot be adequately understood through colonial or proto-colonial frameworks, but rather through adaptive systems of trade, mobility, and negotiated influence (Chukwu, 2025; Okpevra, 2024). In the Nembe–Ogbia context, power was not anchored in territorial sovereignty but in the capacity to control exchange networks, waterways, and intermediary trade positions within the Atlantic commercial system. Contemporary studies on intergroup relations in the Niger Delta highlight that economic leverage, particularly in palm oil and riverine commerce, was the

principal determinant of political influence rather than formal administrative domination (Michael et al., 2022). This reinforces earlier arguments that Niger Delta polities functioned as "trade-centered political economies" rather than expansionist territorial states. However, newer analyses extend this view by showing that such systems were embedded in broader Atlantic and inland networks that constantly reshaped local hierarchies depending on shifting demand and access to external markets (Chukwu, 2025). In this sense, Nembe influence over Ogbia communities should be interpreted as situational asymmetry rather than structural domination. Even when coercive expeditions or tributary demands occurred, they were episodic and tied to specific economic interests, particularly the need to secure trade compliance or protect commercial routes. Recent historiographical revisions argue that such interactions should be conceptualized as "negotiated asymmetry," where dominance was temporary, reversible, and dependent on material conditions rather than institutionalized control systems (Ogbogbo, 2023).

Fluidity of Authority in the Niger Delta Context

Recent interdisciplinary studies reinforce the argument that authority in the Niger Delta was inherently fluid, decentralized, and multi-centered. Authority did not reside exclusively in kingship institutions but was distributed among merchant elites, canoe houses, age-grade organizations, and ritual specialists (Okpevra, 2024; Chukwu, 2025). These overlapping structures produced a system in which legitimacy was continuously renegotiated. Newer scholarship on Niger Delta intergroup relations emphasizes that political authority was "performative and transactional," depending heavily on an actor's ability to sustain economic exchange and social alliances rather than hereditary entitlement alone (Michael et al., 2022). This perspective challenges older structuralist interpretations that portrayed Niger Delta societies as hierarchically rigid. Instead, authority functioned as a networked system in which influence shifted across domains such as trade, warfare, and spirituality. In Nembe–Ogbia relations, this fluidity manifested in alternating cycles of cooperation and conflict. While trade interdependence fostered sustained interaction, disputes over access to creeks, taxation of goods, and control of trade routes periodically disrupted relations. Recent studies of Niger Delta conflict patterns suggest that such tensions were rarely zero-sum; rather, they resulted in renegotiated settlements that restructured exchange relationships without eliminating them (Chukwu, 2025; Ogbogbo, 2024). Furthermore, recent research on Niger Delta governance traditions highlights the importance of ritual authority in stabilizing otherwise fluid political systems. Spiritual institutions and ancestral cults functioned as regulatory mechanisms that legitimized leadership decisions and constrained excessive coercion. This aligns with emerging scholarship that emphasizes the "moral economy of authority" in precolonial African riverine societies (Okpevra, 2024).

Rethinking African Precolonial Political Relations

Contemporary Niger Delta historiography has increasingly moved toward decolonial interpretations that reject Eurocentric state-centric models of political organization. Recent studies argue that applying colonial categories such as "domination," "colonial expansion," or "state sovereignty" to precolonial African systems produces analytical distortion (Ogbogbo, 2024; Chukwu, 2025). Instead, current scholarship emphasizes relational political orders characterized by reciprocity, negotiated hierarchy, and adaptive alliances. In this framework, intergroup relations such as those between Nembe and Ogbia are better understood as evolving systems of interdependence shaped by environmental constraints, trade networks, and shifting power equilibria (Michael et al., 2022). These systems allowed for coexistence between unequal actors without necessarily producing permanent domination. Recent contributions to Niger Delta studies also highlight the importance of "network sovereignty," a concept describing how authority was

exercised through fluid commercial and kinship networks rather than fixed territorial boundaries (Okpevra, 2024). This is particularly relevant to riverine environments where mobility rather than territorial control defined political power. Furthermore, recent analyses of intergroup relations in Nigeria stress that precolonial political systems operated along a spectrum rather than in binary categories of equality or domination. Relations could simultaneously include cooperation in trade, competition over resources, and conflict over strategic waterways (Chukwu, 2025). This multidimensionality challenges earlier historiographies that interpreted economic or military asymmetries as evidence of colonial-style domination. Ultimately, rethinking African precolonial political relations requires an epistemological shift toward indigenous frameworks of political organization. Such frameworks prioritize fluid authority, negotiated legitimacy, and relational power rather than rigid institutional sovereignty. Applying this approach to Nembe–Ogbia relations reveals a complex system of interaction best described not as colonial domination, but as adaptive interdependence within a dynamic riverine ecology.

Summary of Findings

The study finds that Nembe–Ogbia relations were fundamentally structured around economic interdependence, particularly the circulation of goods, access to trade routes, and control over regional commercial networks. Rather than constituting a unilateral system of domination, these relations reflected negotiated exchanges in which both groups pursued strategic advantages within a competitive but interdependent environment. Nembe's prominence in coastal trade and its involvement in regional commerce provided it with considerable influence; however, this influence operated more through economic leverage and alliance-building than through formalized political control. The research further reveals that political authority in the Niger Delta context was highly decentralized and situational. Ogbia communities maintained distinct political identities and governance structures that were not absorbed or systematically subordinated under Nembe authority. Instead, relationships between both groups shifted depending on economic conditions, security concerns, and access to trade opportunities. This fluidity suggests that power was not static but constantly renegotiated through diplomacy, trade relations, and occasional military confrontation. In addition, the study highlights the dual character of conflict and cooperation in Nembe–Ogbia relations. Military engagements, where they occurred, were largely episodic and linked to disputes over trade routes, economic competition, or retaliatory actions rather than sustained campaigns of territorial conquest. Cooperation, on the other hand, remained equally significant, particularly in periods of mutual benefit where trade stability and regional security were prioritized. This coexistence of conflict and cooperation underscores the complexity of precolonial Niger Delta interstate relations.

Contributions to Knowledge

This study makes several significant contributions to the historiography of Niger Delta intergroup relations and to broader African political history. First, it offers a sustained critique of the colonialism thesis as applied to precolonial intra-regional African relations. By demonstrating the conceptual limitations of this framework, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the appropriateness of using colonial categories to interpret indigenous political systems. It argues that such frameworks risk oversimplifying complex historical realities and obscuring indigenous forms of governance, diplomacy, and economic organization. Second, the study advances an alternative analytical perspective that foregrounds fluidity, reciprocity, and negotiated authority as central features of precolonial Niger Delta politics. Instead of viewing power as fixed or territorially absolute, the analysis shows that authority was relational and contingent, often dependent on shifting alliances and economic interdependence. This perspective aligns with broader

historiographical trends that emphasize African agency and indigenous institutional logic in historical interpretation. Third, the research contributes empirically to the relatively underexplored field of Nembe–Ogbia relations. While existing scholarship has focused more broadly on Niger Delta trade systems and coastal polities, detailed studies of intergroup relations between specific communities remain limited. By synthesizing historical accounts and interpreting them within a critical theoretical framework, this study helps to fill an important gap in the literature. Finally, the study contributes to methodological debates in African historiography by demonstrating the value of combining political economy analysis with interpretive historical approaches. It underscores the importance of contextualizing historical evidence within indigenous social structures rather than relying solely on externally imposed theoretical categories.

Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the insights generated by this study, several areas require further scholarly attention. First, there is a clear need for expanded oral historical research within both Nembe and Ogbia communities. Oral traditions remain a vital source of historical reconstruction in the Niger Delta, and systematic collection of narratives from elders, traditional rulers, and trade lineage custodians could provide richer detail on intergroup relations, particularly regarding unresolved historical events, diplomatic practices, and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Second, future research should adopt a comparative regional approach. Examining Nembe–Ogbia relations alongside other Niger Delta polities such as Kalabari, Bonny, Okrika, and Brass would help situate the findings within a broader structural context. Such comparative analysis may reveal whether the patterns identified in this study are unique or reflective of wider systemic features of Niger Delta political economy.

Third, interdisciplinary approaches should be encouraged. Integrating insights from anthropology, archaeology, and political economy would deepen understanding of how material conditions, environmental factors, and social organization shaped intergroup relations. This is particularly important given the ecological complexity of the Niger Delta, which significantly influenced patterns of settlement, trade, and conflict.

Lastly, future scholarship should continue to refine theoretical frameworks for interpreting precolonial African interstate relations. Rather than relying on colonial or Eurocentric models, researchers should develop concepts rooted in African historical experience, such as relational authority, negotiated sovereignty, and networked political economies. Such frameworks will contribute to a more accurate and intellectually autonomous understanding of African history.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the application of the concept of colonialism to the historical interactions between the Nembe and Ogbia communities in the Niger Delta. It has demonstrated that characterizing these relations as "colonial" represents a significant conceptual and historical misinterpretation rooted in Eurocentric analytical frameworks. Rather than reflecting the rigid, hierarchical, and territorially fixed structures associated with classical colonialism, Nembe–Ogbia relations were shaped by fluid, negotiated, and context-dependent forms of power. The analysis reveals that Nembe influence in the region was primarily anchored in its strategic position within regional trade networks, its role as a commercial intermediary, and its capacity for military assertion when necessary. However, such influence did not translate into sustained territorial control, administrative domination, or the systemic subjugation of Ogbia communities. Instead, the relationship was characterized by economic interdependence, intermittent conflict, diplomatic engagement, and the preservation of local autonomy. Ogbia communities, far from being passive subjects, actively negotiated, resisted, and adapted to shifting regional dynamics.

By interrogating the colonialism thesis and exploring alternative frameworks such as hegemony, spheres of influence, and indigenous systems of alliance and tribute, this study underscores the need for more context-sensitive approaches to African historical analysis. It highlights the importance of grounding interpretations in indigenous political logics, oral traditions, and the socio-economic realities of precolonial societies, rather than imposing externally derived categories that obscure historical specificity.

Ultimately, the Nembe–Ogbia case illustrates that precolonial African political systems were neither primitive nor embryonic forms of European-style statehood, but rather complex, adaptive, and sophisticated in their own right. Recognizing this complexity not only enriches our understanding of Niger Delta history but also contributes to broader debates on African political thought, governance, and intergroup relations. It calls for a continued reassessment of entrenched historiographical assumptions and encourages the development of analytical frameworks that more accurately reflect the diversity and dynamism of African pasts.

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