



Diplomatic Rituals, Trade and Colonial Negotiations: A Study of Nembe and Epie Relations

Sambo Johnson Madigwe* & Bailey Beauty Binakori**

*Department of History Education, Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

**Department of Social Studies Education, Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

johnsonsambo1980@gmail.com, johnsonsambo080@ijbcoe.edu.ng

Abstract

This research explores the intricate tapestry of inter-group relations between the Nembe and Epie peoples in the Niger Delta, with a particular focus on diplomatic rituals, trade interactions, and colonial-era negotiations. The Ijoid and Delta Edoid-speaking communities have historically shared complex socio-religious ties shaped by kinship, commerce, ritual diplomacy, and later, the pressures of colonial imposition. The research examines how traditional diplomatic practices—such as oath-taking, exchange of ritual items, and intermarriage—functioned not only as conflict resolution tools but also as frameworks for sustaining peaceful coexistence and mutual economic benefits. The study is underpinned by the Transactional Theory of Diplomacy as a process of reciprocal exchange involving both tangible (trade, gifts) and intangible (prestige, alliances) assets. This theoretical lens allows a deeper interrogation of how local actors navigated authority, identity, and autonomy amidst changing political and religious landscapes. The thematic foci to guide this inquiry are as follows: Ritual Diplomacy and inter-group Covenant-making—which analysis indigenous protocols that governed relations and conflict mediation; Trade Networks and Maritime Exchange—by this assessing the role of canoe-borne commerce and barter systems in shaping regional economy is structured; and Colonial Interference and Negotiated Adaptations—investigating how colonial agents disrupted or co-opted existing diplomatic systems, especially during treaty-making and the imposition of indirect rule. The research contributes to the growing literature on Niger Delta history by foregrounding subaltern diplomatic practices often overshadowed by colonial documentation. It underscores the resilience and agency of local communities in adapting and resisting external pressures through culturally embedded negotiations. In conclusion, understanding Nembe-Epie relations offers new insights into pre-colonial and colonial diplomacy in Africa. Recommendations include incorporating indigenous diplomatic knowledge into peace-building frameworks and emphasizing oral histories in reconstructing inter-ethnic relations.

Keywords: Nembe, Epie, Diplomatic Rituals, Trade Networks, Colonial Negotiations, Niger Delta.

INTRODUCTION

The historical interplay between diplomacy, commerce, and colonial imposition in the Niger Delta of Nigeria has often been narrated through the prism of European encounters, leaving indigenous inter-group dynamics inadequately examined. This research, titled *Diplomatic Rituals, Trade and Colonial Negotiations: A study of Nembe and Epie Relations*, seeks to illuminate the rich, yet underexplored, matrix of inter-communal interactions between the Nembe and Epie peoples of Ijoid and Delta Edoid –speaking groups of the Central Niger Delta in present-day Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Their relationship, like every other Niger Delta ethnic groups spanning precolonial to colonial periods, was characterized by intricate diplomatic engagements, reciprocal trade ties, and shifting socio-religious alignments shaped both by internal agency and external pressures.

The Nembe, known for their expansive maritime networks, established themselves as powerful middlemen in the Niger Delta trade by the 18th and 19th centuries. Accordingly, Alagoa (2005) opined that the Nembe-Brass people acted as commercial intermediaries between the

hinterland communities and European merchants, particularly during the palm oil boom. For Sambo (2025) the concept of diplomacy intertwined with commerce has long served as a strategic tool of the United States been a supplier of military and economic support to her Allied powers in Europe during the World War II, framing itself as the “arsenal of democracy” while maintaining control over supply chains and post-war reconstruction dynamics. Similarly, in the nineteenth century Niger Delta region, Sambo (2025), emphasized the application of the Nembe-Brass strategic lever to enhance her influence over the inland communities of Epie, maintained her status as commercial and diplomatic mediator between European merchants and the Epie people during the high tide of the oil palm trade. Thus, he stressed that the Nembe-Brass people acted as both a political authority and trade facilitator, established themselves as regional powerbrokers through which trade and foreign diplomacy were negotiated.

On the other hand, the Epie-Atissa, according to Sorgwe (2000) are relatively inland creek dwellers spread along two significant creeks, Epie creek and the Ekole creek, running from about thirty kilometers from the popular Orashi River and the River Nun in the north and flows further south connecting the Nembe-Brass estuary and the Atlantic coast. For him the Epie, although are smaller in political scale, maintained vibrant and cordial interactions with her neighbours on the north and north-west, southwest, and with the Nembe through indigenous trade routes, exchanging fish, palm produce, raffia, and foodstuffs for manufactured European goods, and sea-food, fish, and salt.

For Okorobia (2013) these trade relations though has basic economic undertone, but were embedded in diplomatic rituals as exchange of gifts were carried out, oath-taking, intermarriage, and ritual feasts, which served to maintain peace and regulate competition over resources.

In addition, the imposition of British colonial rule in the late 19th century transformed the nature of their relations. Thus, the treaty-making processes, which the colonial agents deployed to assert authority, often overlooked or undermined indigenous diplomatic norms. Yet, both Nembe-Brass kingdom and Epie communities employed creative strategies to negotiate their autonomy, resist subjugation, and adapt their diplomatic and economic systems to colonial exigencies (Tamuno, 1970; Dike, 1956).

With reference to Alagoa's (1964) treatise, the Nembe-Brass Kingdom by the opening of 1700s the Nembe, been located in the Brass River region, had risen as a formidable trading state, strategically positioned to control inland and coastal trade flows. Her elites developed extensive canoe-borne trading networks, ferrying palm oil and other products from inland communities of the Epie whom, according to Yakie (2010), opined that in the report of Richard and John Lander to the British Government that the territory along River Niger and Nun banks grow abundance of natural palm trees. To him that information prompted the British traders to initiate a tour to visit the Epie territory whose confluence town Yenaka lies between the junction of River Nun and the Ekole creek, where the Lander Brothers and King Boy Amain of Nembe-Brass had earlier visited in November 1830 whom the official British traders chose as the ideal place to establish a company. Thus, this event was what triggered the signing of the Treaty of Protection between the Royal Niger Company and the people of Yenaka town in 1885, leading to the establishment of an oil palm factory.

Thus, during the 18th and 19th centuries the mediating position of the Nembe-Brass allowed them to exert diplomatic and economic authority over most hinterland communities and inland Delta Edoid ethnic group of Epie to European merchants at the coastal depots, much like the United States with its European allies.

Archival records from the Church Missionary Society (CMS Archives, G3 A3/0 1846) indicate that European traders, especially the British, were dependent on Nembe middlemen for access to the interior. Similarly, Epie communities, who lacked direct coastal access, relied on Nembe traders to export their oil palm produce in exchange for European goods. Thus, Nembe diplomacy operated on two fronts: externally, negotiating trade terms with European merchants, and internally, maintained control over the inland supply chain through a blend of economic incentives, kinship

diplomacy, and occasional coercion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Transactional Theory of Diplomacy posits that diplomacy functions as a continuous process of exchange-of goods, gestures, values, and legitimacy-between political actors unlike classical realist or idealist theories that prioritize power or morality respectively, the transactional approach underscores the negotiated reciprocity that binds diplomatic actors within symbolic and material transactions. It draws its core ideas from symbolic interactionism, economic anthropology, and constructivist international relations (Watson, 1982; Sharp 2009).

At its core, the theory holds that rituals, trade, and negotiations are not peripheral activities but central mechanisms through which political identities and hierarchies are formed and reformed. Diplomacy in this context is seen as a social contract, not only between formal states but among sub-state entities, polities, and cultural communities.

Its applicability to Nembe-Epie relations, thus between 1800 and 1950, Nembe (an Ijo polity) and Epie (a Delta Edoid community) engaged in patterns of trade, conflict resolution, and ritual exchanges that exemplify transactional diplomacy. These engagements took place in the context of shifting colonial boundaries, missionary influence, and economic transformations driven by the oil palm trade and British hegemony (Crowther, 1872; Church Missionary Society (SMS) 1890-1910).

From the transactional perspective, every trade or diplomatic encounter was not just economic but also symbolic-each laden with expectations, encoded messages, and re-negotiated status positions. The exchange of goods, for instance; salt, oil palm, and fish was inseparable from the exchange of diplomatic courtesies (e.g., emissary visits, marriage alliances, libation rituals, and naming practices).

In this context key assumptions of the Transactional Model are to be applied such as;

Diplomacy is Dialogic

Dialogic in the sense that both Nembe and Epie are expected to follow the basic principles of communication or negotiation approach such as; conversational where both sides are to engage in a mutual exchange of ideas, concerns, and interests; interactive where parties engage with each other, listen to each other's perspectives, and respond in a collaborative manner; and mutual understanding the goal of achieving empathy, and a deeper comprehension of each other's needs, interests, and concerns. Engaging in diplomacy as dialogues of recognition, even where asymmetries existed, each community is expected to recognize the legitimacy of the other as a trade, religious or political actor, even amid colonial interference. In contrast to monologic approaches, which are often one-way communication involving single party imposing their will, or conveying information without much regard for the other party's concerns or interests, and thus relies on coercion, or pressure to achieve desired outcomes, rather than seeking mutual understanding or cooperation (British Colonial Office, 1896).

Exchange is Not Merely Economic

Diplomatic rituals such as libations, oath-taking, and peace feasts represent symbolic capital. The transactional theory regards these as forms of non-monetary diplomacy used to stabilize or challenge hierarchies.

Power is negotiated through Transaction

Even in colonial contexts where British indirect rule imposed structural constraints, local actors used transactionality to reclaim agency-deciding when to negotiate, when to resist, and how to stage rituals of diplomacy to manipulate perception.

Rituals are Instruments of Statecraft

Epie's invocation of spiritual ancestry or Nembe's uses of masquerade diplomacy were technologies of soft power, enabling diplomacy to occur on indigenous terms even as colonial powers tried to redefine the norms (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2013).

Key Dimensions of Transaction in Nembe-Epe Diplomacy

Dimension	Example in Nembe-Epie Context	Transactional Meaning
Material	Exchange of goods (e.g., oil palm for salt/fish)	Embedded economic diplomacy
Ritual	Shared rites, festivals, burial diplomacy	Consolidation of shared cosmologies
Temporal	Seasonal exchanges, wartime pacts	Time-based mutuality (e.g., dry season trade)
Spatial	Control of riverine routes	Negotiated access and territorial courtesy
Political/Religious	Colonial mediation, emissary diplomacy	Coercion of legitimacy in indirect rule

Thus, the benefits applying Transactional Theory of Diplomacy in the context of Nembe-Epie relations is that:

*It decolonizes diplomatic history by focusing on African agency in the negotiation of colonial encounters.

*Bridges anthropology and international relations by interpreting economic activities as embedded in socio-political and religious context.

*Explains hybrid diplomatic forms, such as the use of both indigenous and colonial styles of diplomacy. And

*Highlights ritual and performance as serious diplomatic currencies.

Similarly, its relevance to historical methodology encourages the use of:

*Oral history and ethnography to capture ritual meanings.

*Missionary records and colonial dispatches to understand external perceptions of diplomacy. And

*Material culture studies such as; canoes, salt vessels, dress codes, and bits as forms of transactional symbology (Peter, 2021).

The application of this theory to the historical study of Nembe-Epie relations reveals a robust web of meaning behind ritual, trade, and negotiation. It as well resists reductive interpretations of African diplomacy as merely reactive to colonialism and instead foregrounds African strategic agency, cultural logic, and ceremonial statecraft.

Ritual Diplomacy and Inter-Group Covenant-Making

Among coastal and hinterland communities of Nembe and Epie of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, ritual diplomacy and inter-group covenant-making are pivotal yet underexplored components of African indigenous diplomacy. Ritual diplomacy provided the moral, spiritual, and symbolic scaffolding for sustaining inter-group relations, especially in periods of trade expansion and colonial intervention. Thus, the use of rituals-symbolic oaths, covenant objects, and sacred ceremonies were used as instruments of diplomatic negotiation and alliance-building between Nembe and the Epie ethnic group from the pre-colonial to early colonial period. Anchored within the broader discourse on African diplomacy, this research study demonstrates that ritual diplomacy was central not only to inter-group trust but also to the legitimacy of trade agreements and responses to colonial incursions. The concept of ritual diplomacy is based on the employment of symbolic practices of religious invocations, ceremonial exchanges, oath-swearing, and communal rites-in the establishment and maintenance of peaceful inter-group relationships (Ajayi & Crowder, 1974). These rituals were grounded in cosmological beliefs, with ancestral forces acting as witnesses to covenants. Thus, this proves that diplomacy was not merely political or economic but spiritual, as failure to uphold agreements was believed to invoke supernatural sanctions.

In the Niger Delta, as opined by Alagoa (2005) these practices were reinforced by the overlapping roles of priests, elders, and traditional rulers, who often served as custodians of ritual

protocols. Accordingly, among Nembe and Epie communities, diplomacy could not occur without invoking river deities such as *idiomu-amini* and *mindibio-oru* from the Nun and Ekole Rivers or Epie creek, invoking ancestral spirits or presenting blood oaths, all of which conferred spiritual legitimacy to political agreements, enforce or superintend over both socio-political and economic engagements, and purposefully to be a great merchant owning commercial influence over the others (Feegha, 1988).

Nembe and Epie relations were shaped by proximity, environmental interdependence, and shared resistance to external pressures. While the Nembe were major players in Atlantic and oil palm trade through the Nembe-Brass route, the Epie communities controlled inland trade routes connecting the Engenni people, the Akiogbologbo in Okarki, River State, her Ogbia neighbours, and other Ijo communities along the Tailor creek. Along the Ekole River connecting the River Nun via the Epie Creek around present-day Yenagoa, the people had trade connection with the Isoko people of Delta State (Isoun, 2003). Both groups recognized the strategic need to secure access to markets, navigation corridors, and alliances against more powerful neighbours in both Central and Eastern Niger Delta such as the Bonny, Elem-Kalabari, and the Ogbia, as well as the European merchants. This is buttressed on the fact that out of thirty villages in Epie-Atissa, seven has its migratory history within the neighbouring Ijo block among whom the Epie communities inhabit.

Accordingly, the role of ritual diplomacy became even more pronounced during the opening of the 19th century, an era marked by trade monopolies, missionary intrusion, and the onset of British paramountcy system. During this period, documented oral traditions and colonial accounts recount multiple instances of trade disputes involving traders of both ethnic groups, handled by Chiefdoms' Courts which prompted, oath-taking between influential Nembe traders and Epie elders to prevent betrayal, define trading boundaries, and share security responsibilities (Alagoa, 2005; Okorobia, 2014; Sambo, 2025). The expression of ritual diplomacy between and among these groups, Nembe and Epie contractual via several ritualized forms:

Oath-Taking (Igbandu-oru)

Sacred oaths were sworn in the presence of deities or on sacred objects like the *ekine* (warrior figurine) or *ekpe* drums. These oaths often involved bloodletting, libation, and the invocation of ancestral wrath upon violators. These rites were typically conducted by titled elders, custodian of the people's tradition (oldest man) or priests (Okorobia, 2014).

Exchange of Symbolic Objects

Items like white chalk (*nzu*), palm fronds, Negro pepper (*xyloia aethopica*) and alligator pepper (*afromomum melegueta*) and as well as *prekese* (aidan fruit) were exchanged as tokens of peace. The presentation of these items signified a binding agreement and an appeal to the gods and goddess as guarantor's of peace.

Feasting and Libation

Ritual feasts played a central role in solidifying covenants. During these events, Isoun (2003) opined that shared meals, local gin distillate, and palm-wine, and as well as ritual incantations ensured that the covenant was embedded in communal memory and transmitted orally across generations.

Boundary Ceremonies

In defining trading rights, the Nembe and Epie trading merchant's or concern groups or individual's performed rituals invoking river goddess and earth deities. In these ceremonies, the river and ancestral spirits was invoked as both witness and enforcer of the trading rights.

Ritual diplomacy also functioned as a mechanism of resistance against colonial encroachment at a time when the British Consular authorities attempted to impose new trade routes or political arrangements, but Nembe and Epie trading partners often reaffirmed traditional covenants to assert their autonomy. For instance, the reaffirmation of trade covenants in the wake of the 1895 Nembe

War reflected indigenous attempts to preserve inter-group solidarity against external domination (Kirk-Greene, 1980). This ritual affirmation also undermined British efforts at direct rule, as the colonial authorities struggled to penetrate the spiritual legitimacy of indigenous agreements, which often remained opaque to foreign actors. As such, rituals served as a shield of cultural sovereignty and a language of diplomacy that colonial officers found difficult to decode or override.

While the practice of formal ritual diplomacy has waned under modern legal and administrative systems, its legacy endures in communal memory and customary arbitration practices. Disputes over trade interest, fishing rights, or instillation of chieftaincy titles in the Nembe-Epie corridor still invoke ancestral covenants and ritual claims. In the wake of oil-induced environmental conflicts, appeals to ritual histories are increasingly used to negotiate compensation and access (Okorobia, 2014).

Furthermore, the symbolic aspects of these diplomatic rituals-respect for elders, invocation of ancestors, and communal decision-making-continue to inform inter-group dialogue and conflict resolution, particularly where formal state mechanisms are perceived as illegitimate or corrupt. Why ritual diplomacy became a vital tool-kit in the architecture of pre-colonial and colonial diplomatic relations between the Nembe and Epie people was because those practices served not only to legitimize trade and alliance-building, but also safeguard autonomy, affirm identity, and resist foreign domination. Their spiritual and symbolic dimensions underline the sophistication of African diplomatic culture-one that colonial narratives often overlooked or misunderstood. As such, ritual diplomacy deserves renewed scholarly attention as a crucial element of Niger Delta history and a potential framework for post-colonial peace-building.

Trade Networks and Maritime Exchange

One major region of the World whose intricate waterways and ethnolinguistic diversity, has historically served as a nexus for inter-group trade, cultural exchange, and diplomacy is the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Among the key players in this maritime and economic theatre were the Nembe of Ijoid and Epie of Edoid peoples, whose strategic locations along riverine and hinterland corridors enabled them to develop robust trade networks and participate in expansive maritime exchanges.

The Nembe people, who are located in the Brass region along the Atlantic coast, were among the most prominent Ijoid-speaking communities to engage in long-distance trade, particularly in salt, sea-foods, and European manufactured goods. According to Alagoa (2005) their access to maritime routes gave them control over key points of entry for European trade from the period 17th century onward. In contrast, the Epie people, occupying a major inland area and the neighbourhood of (Iyeni-Ogwo-Ede) now Yenagoa an Epie community situated on the banks of rivers-served as the connecting bridge to many other hinterland Ijo communities. Thus, tens of decades have they served as critical intermediaries between the Nembe coastal traders and the upland communities of Central Bayelsa, Delta, and parts of Rivers State?

Her physical environment, characterized by creeks, rivers, notably the Ekole, Epie creek, and River Nun, and large expanse of land for cultivation, necessitated the development of waterborne trade and transfer of other goods and services (lend-lease diplomacy) applying dug-out canoes, pontoons, and later, motorized launches. This made maritime exchange not only feasible but preferable, thereby fostering networks that depended on control over navigable waters and landfall trading ports (Okorobia, 2014).

Trade networks between Nembe and Epie communities were multi-tiered and functioned along both vertical and horizontal axes:

Vertical Exchange (Coastal-Hinterland)

The Nembe acted as coastal exporters and importers, obtaining goods from European traders such as firearms, cloth, and liquor, which they redistributed inland. In return, they received oil palm, raffia palm, cassava, prekese (Aidan fruit), xylopia aethiopica (Negro pepper), plantain, maize,

Alligator pepper (*Aframomum melegueta*), coco-yam, and snails, as well as other foodstuffs from the Epie and other interior communities (Dike, 1956).

Horizontal Exchange (Inter-group Markets)

Inter-group markets, such as those held at Ogbia, Epie creek, Engenne along the Orashi River, and the Apoi axis, facilitated the exchange of local produce such as: native yam, periwinkles, raffia, among neighbouring groups. These markets also served as diplomatic grounds for renewing trade alliances, resolving dispute, and reinforcing kinship ties (Isoun, 2003).

Brokerage Roles

The Epie, due to their central location, often served as brokers or middlemen. They mediated not only the physical exchange of goods but also the diplomatic rituals that enabled such transactions-such as the swearing of oaths or presentation of peace offerings (Alagoa, 2005).

Trade in this region was regulated through intricate systems of diplomacy. Access to creeks, fish ponds, forest products, and markets was often governed by inter-group covenants. For Okorobia (2014) these diplomatic instruments were upheld through ritual diplomacy, involving symbolic gift-giving, sacrificial libations, and communal feasting. Accordingly, trading voyages between Nembe and Epie territories were rarely conducted without prior notification or escort by local elders. Such protocols ensured the safety of traders and prevented hostilities. Violations of trade agreements or acts of deception could lead to spiritual sanctions or warfare, thereby underscoring the moral and spiritual dimensions of commerce (Ajayi, 1974).

By the mid-19th century, European economic and political interests significantly altered the structure of Nembe-Epie trade. The British suppression of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and promotion of vegetable commerce, intensified competition among Ijo kingdoms. The Nembe, with Brass as their port, became direct interlocutors of European firms such as the Royal Niger Company (RNC), bypassing traditional inland partners like the Epie (Kirk-Greene, 1980). This shift led to tensions, as inland communities were increasingly marginalized from profits and influence. Colonial treaties-often signed unilaterally with coastal kings-undermined existing covenants and distorted indigenous trade protocols. The 1895 Nembe War, which marked Nembe resistance against the Royal Niger Company, exemplifies how economic marginalization and breach of diplomatic norms could lead to violent conflict (Alagoa, 2005).

Despite colonial disruption, the enduring interdependence between Nembe and Epie ensured that trade relations persisted, albeit under new terms. Many oral traditions speak of post-conflict reconciliations, often mediated by ritual ceremonies and inter-marriages that emphasized collective identity and peace-building. Thus, the enduring legacy of these trade networks is seen today in market centers and fish trading agreements that still reflect pre-colonial arrangements. Oral histories and elder testimonies continue to preserve these memories as part of the cultural and economic heritage of the Ijo ethnic group. Thus, trade network and maritime exchange systems between Nembe and Epie communities is rooted in geography and sustained by diplomacy, and as well structured around mutual dependence, spiritual legitimization, and complex systems of inter-group negotiation.

Colonial interference and Negotiated Adaptation

Colonial interference in indigenous diplomatic systems across West Africa triggered profound transformations in inter-group relations, particularly among communities with well-established customs of negotiation, trade, and alliance-building. In the Niger Delta, the relationship between Nembe and Epie peoples offers a compelling case study of how colonial intrusion-through treaties, missionary activity, trade monopolies, and indirect rule-reshaped traditional systems of governance and diplomacy. The abolishment of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the mid-19th century, purposely redirected European interest towards vegetable oil and other “legitimate” commodities. This move heightened, British colonial involvement in the Niger Delta commercial trading system, socio-political restructuring, and the idea of imposing political structures which intend to undermine traditional

authorities. Thus, in response to the colonial pressures the Nembe and Epie applied a process described as negotiated adaptation-a dual strategy of resistance and accommodation that sought to preserve indigenous authority and maintain inter-group relations amid the disruption of colonial rule.

Accordingly, the Nembe, who controlled Brass-an important coastal trade hub-were drawn into direct relations with European companies, notably the Royal Niger Company (RNC), which aggressively sought to monopolize inland trade routes. Thus, this expansionist policy marginalized traditional middlemen like the Epie, who occupied the inland creek settlements essential for moving goods between the hinterland and coast. As the imposition of political structure by colonial officials undermined traditional authorities, signing of treaties by individual chiefs without regard for established inter-group protocols or communal decision-making customs intensified British indirect rule system in the Niger Delta. According to Crowder (1973), the British consular officers negotiated directly with the King of Nembe without involving chiefs or elders of neighbouring allies like the Epie, thereby distorting the trust and interdependent political economy that had long underpinned Nembe-Epie relations.

This interference weakened the moral foundations of diplomacy among Niger Delta communities by undermining ritual processes that had previously legitimized trade agreements. Accordingly, pre-colonial diplomacy in the Delta environ that was typically anchored in shared rituals-such as oath-taking, libation, and exchange of covenant symbols-that affirmed spiritual accountability and community consent all became weakened because the British officials failed to understand or respect these practices, and most times replacing them with written treaties enforced by military power (Okorobia, 2014). The consequences that followed this distortion was the 1895 Nembe War, during which Nembe-Brass forces attacked the Royal Niger Company's headquarter in protest of the company's monopolistic practices. Thus, this act of resistance was in part motivated by the perceived betrayal of pre-existing trade agreements and the bypassing of traditional authority structures. According to Kirk-Greene (1980) while Nembe bore the brunt of British retaliation, Epie communities also suffered the indirect consequences of disrupted trade routes and increased military surveillance.

Despite the disruptive nature of colonial interference, Nembe and Epie communities did not passively accept external domination. Instead, they adopted various strategies of negotiated adaptation-modifying traditional institutions and rituals to accommodate colonial realities while preserving core values and political autonomy.

Redefining Diplomatic Authority: Indigenous leaders began to reinterpret their roles in ways that allowed them to interface with colonial authorities while still commanding legitimacy within their communities. Take for instance, the Epie elders despite that entire still participated in the administrative duties of the Colonial Native Court systems under the Brass Division (Brasdist) while continuing to mediate disputes through customary practices (Sambo, 2025).

Syncretism in Ritual Practices: Some diplomatic rituals were reinterpreted or performed in private to avoid colonial scrutiny. In other cases, Christianized forms of covenant-making (e.g., swearing oaths on the Bible) were integrated into indigenous customs, enabling traditional diplomacy to continue under a colonial veneer (Alagoa, 2005).

Economic Diversification and Resistance: Epie communities increasingly relied on diversified economic practices such as fishing, subsistence farming, and participation in wage labour to mitigate the economic dislocation caused by colonial trade restrictions. Nembe traders, meanwhile, explored alternative markets and smuggling routes to circumvent the Royal Niger Company's stranglehold (Dike, 1956).

Oral Histories and Cultural Memory as Resistance: By embedding accounts of colonial disruption and indigenous resilience into oral traditions, Nembe and Epie communities preserved historical consciousness and a sense of identity. These narratives often highlight heroic resistance, sacred covenants broken by outsiders, and the moral superiority of traditional diplomacy over

colonial coercion.

Although colonial interference strained relations between the groups, their historical interdependence fostered a long-term resilience that enabled them to adapt. Periodic trade disputes were followed by renewed negotiations and shared rituals that reaffirmed groups bond. This was evident in the post-Akassa period, where marriage alliances and informal trading arrangements continued despite British efforts to govern them as separate political entities. In as much as the colonial era marked a turning point in their relations, characterized by the erosion of traditional diplomatic rituals and the imposition of foreign administrative structures. Yet, the response of both communities was not mere acquiescence but a complex process of negotiated adaptation, redefining their institutions, modifying ritual practices, and preserving cultural memory.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reflecting on the examined intricate dynamics of diplomatic rituals, trade relations, and colonial negotiations between the Nembe and Epie peoples of the Niger Delta in this study. It revealed that, long before colonial incursion, both communities maintained structured systems of inter-group diplomacy grounded in ritual practices, covenant-making, and shared economic interests. These rituals were not mere cultural expressions but were central to the enforcement of trust, the legitimization of trade, and the mediation of disputes. Trade networks, especially maritime exchanges, linked Nembe's coastal economy with Epie's inland markets, creating mutual dependency and fostering stable alliances.

However, British colonial interference disrupted these systems. The imposition of treaties, trade monopolies, and indirect rule undermined traditional authorities and spiritual foundations of diplomacy. Nevertheless, the Nembe and Epie communities did not remain passive. Instead, they engaged in negotiated adaptation-a strategic blend of resistance, cultural reinvention, and political engagement that preserved aspects of their autonomy and inter-group solidarity (Dike, 1956; Crowder, 1973). The persistence of these relational frameworks into the post-colonial era underscores the resilience of indigenous diplomatic traditions and the cultural memory of cooperative coexistence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the fact those traditional practices such as covenant-making, ritual mediation, and communal arbitration remains vital to conflict resolutions in contemporary times, we therefore recommend it should be recognized and integrated into modern frameworks for peace-building and local governance. This is because customary institutions as opined by Okorobia (2014) remain relevant in managing land disputes, chieftaincy conflicts, and communal negotiations. We as well recommend that if possible systemic documentation of groups diplomatic rituals, trade customs, and inter-group treaties are necessary to prevent cultural erasure. Oral histories, local elders, and community-based researchers should be engaged in this process. Promoting of inter-group cultural exchanges such as annual festivals, youth programmes, and educational initiatives that promotes shared cultural heritage between socio-groups should be encouraged. Because they are possible of reviving collective memory and strengthening inter-ethnic ties, especially in the face of modern political and environmental challenges.

REFERENCES

- Ajayi, F.A., & Crowder, M. (Eds.). (1974). *History of West Africa: Volume One*. Longman.
- Ajayi, F.A., & Crowder, M. (Eds.). (1974). *History of West Africa: Volume One*. Longman.
- Alagoa, E.J. (1964). *The small brave City-State: A history of Nembe-Brass in the Niger Delta*. Ibadan University Press.
- Alagoa, E.J. (2005). *A history of the Niger Delta: An historical interpretation of Ijo oral tradition*. Onyoma Research Publications.

- Alagoa, E.J. (2005). A history of the Niger Delta: An historical interpretation of Ijo oral tradition. Onyoma Research Publications.
- Bjola, C., & Korrnprobst, M. (2013). Understanding international diplomacy: Theory, practice and ethics. Routledge.
- British Colonial Office. (1896). Dispatches on tribal treaties and trade negotiations in the Niger Delta Protectorate. CO 520/56. The National Archives, Kew, UK. <https://www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>
- Church Missionary Society Archives. (1846). Nembe and Brass River correspondence, G3 A3/0. University Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk>
- Church Missionary Society (CMS). (1890-1910). Correspondence relating to missionary activities in the Niger Delta region (Nembe and surrounding areas). CMS/B/OMS/A6/N5. Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk>
- Crowther, S.A. (1872). Journal entries and missionary letters from the Lower Niger Missions. CMS/A1/72. Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk>
- Crowder, M. (1973). West Africa under colonial rule. Hutchinson University Library for Africa.
- Dike, K.O. (1956). Trade and politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885: An introduction to the economic and political history of Nigeria. Clarendon Press.
- Dike, K.O. (1956). Trade and politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885: An introduction to the economic and political history of Nigeria. Clarendon Press.
- Fefegha, S.A. (1988). Divination in the Niger Delta with reference to Epie-Atissa communities [Doctoral dissertation submitted to the School of Oriental and African Studies University of London]. Proquest Dissertation 10672607.
- Isoun, T.T. (2003). Culture and identity in the Central Delta: Essays on Ijo ethnicity and inter-group relations. Delga Press.
- Isoun, T.T. (2003). Culture and identity in the Central Delta: Essay on Ijo ethnicity and inter-group relations. Delga Press.
- Kirk-Greene, A.H.M. (1980). Crisis and conflict in Nigeria: A documentary source-book 1860 – 1970 (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- Kirk-Greene, A.H.M. (1980). Crisis and conflict in Nigeria: A documentary source-book 1860 - 1970 (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- Okorobia, A.M. (2013). Tradition and change in the Niger Delta: A historical survey of inter-group relations. University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Okorobia, A.M. (2014). Tradition, trade and diplomacy in the Niger Delta: The role of customary practices in inter-group relations. Niger Delta Heritage Series.
- Okorobia, A.M. (2014). Tradition, trade and diplomacy in the Niger Delta: The role of customary practices in inter-group relations. Niger Delta Heritage Series.
- Peter, A.N. (2021). The dynamics of cross-cultural negotiations in pre-colonial Eastern Nigeria [Doctoral dissertation, University of Nigeria, Nsukka]. UNN Institutional Repository. <https://unn.edu.ng/reository/theses/peters2021>
- Sharp, P. (2009). Diplomatic theory of international relations. Cambridge University Press.
- Sambo, J.M. (2025). Epie and her neighbours: A study in inter-group relations and diplomatic practices in the Niger Delta, 1800 – 2015 [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Ignatius Ajuru

University of Education.

Sambo, J.M. (2025). Epie and her neighbours: A study in inter-group relations and diplomatic practices in the Niger Delta, 1800 – 2015 [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

Sorgwe, C.M. (2000). Epie-Atissa since 1550: A history of an Edoid community. OSIA Int'l Publishing Co. Ltd.

Tamino, T.N. (1970). The evolution of the Nigerian state: The Southern Phase, 1898-1914. Longman.

Watson, A. (1982). Diplomacy: The dialogue between states. Methuen.

Yakie, N. (2010). The Epie-Atissa people: A historical survey. Nay Nigeria Ltd.