

Intergroup Relations and Identity Shifts between Nembe and Opuama to 1970

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Abstract

This study examines relations between Nembe and Opuama from their origin at Obiama to the end of the Civil War in 1970. It draws on primary and secondary sources and utilises Social Identity Theory to interpret how contact changed over time. In the earlier period, kinship, marriage, exchange and ritual kept both groups in close contact. Identity took shape within these ties and was not fixed. The history of naming reflects this. Seibiri first referred to dancing. Later, Seibiri came to be used in a negative way. This did not remain. The name Opuama replaced it and marked a clear shift in how the community chose to be known. Colonial rule altered existing arrangements. Local authority weakened, and new forms of rule, mission activity and schooling spread. Contact between Nembe and Opuama continued, but under different conditions. The Civil War brought further strain. Movement became unsafe, trade declined and contact reduced. Activities that once linked both groups became difficult to sustain. Trust also weakened during this period. Relations between Nembe and Opuama did not follow a fixed path. They changed with shifting conditions. Even so, the link between them remained.

Keywords: Intergroup, Relations, Identity, shifts, Nembe, Opuama

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Introduction

One of the central components of human society is intergroup relations, shaped by social, economic, and cultural interactions in the everyday lives of the people who occupy these communities. The Niger Delta's geography and lineage-based settlements have played an important role in facilitating these relations through the patterns of migration, economic exchange, and socio-political contact, leading to cooperation, security, conflicts, and in some cases, war. The relationship between Nembe and Opuama provides a practical example of how groups with shared ancestry experienced both cooperation and conflict. Although both traced their roots to a common source, their migration, settlement, political organisation and cultural adjustment produced shifting patterns of interaction. Trade, territorial interests and external pressures shaped their ties and redefined identities. Examining these developments clarifies how relations evolved in the Eastern and Central Delta up to and after the Nigerian Civil War, 1967 to 1970.

The historical foundations of both Nembe and Opuama can be traced to Obiama, an early settlement in the Okoroma area of present day Nembe Local Government Area. Scholars of Niger Delta history, such as Emeritus Professor E. J. Alagoa and Professor A. M. Okorobia, describe Obiama as an important dispersal centre from which several Ijaw lineage groups originated. While the earliest migrations into the region are too remote to be precisely recalled, the movements within the Delta, particularly those from Obiama, are well preserved in oral traditions.¹ The community's strategic location, bordering Southern Ijaw territory, where Opuama is situated, and the Ogbia area, positioned it as a nucleus from which multiple settlements emerged. Oral accounts trace Obiama to Obia. From him came Okpo and Boma. Okpo is linked with the founding of Okpoama and with Kala Ekule, remembered as the first king of Nembe. Boma's line is associated with Opu, who settled in a place first called Seibiri, meaning people that dance. This points to a shared beginning before the two groups lived apart.²

Following minor disagreements with Nembe, the community was mockingly referred to as Seibiri, interpreted as bad people. In response, the settlers redefined their identity and eventually adopted the name Opuama, a change that symbolised autonomy, dignity and self definition while still acknowledging shared ancestry with Nembe. The dispersal of Obia's descendants was influenced by negotiations over land, and ritual dispute involving the sharing of a hare. These dynamics resulted in the establishment of littoral communities such as Okpoama, Odioama, Twon and the Cape Formosa settlements of Beletiamia, Egweama and Liama.³ According to Alagoa, oral traditions of the Boma (Bumo) clan identify Obi as the founder of Obiama, although his place of origin remains unknown, reflecting the fluidity of historical memory within the clan.⁴ There are also traces of this past in cultural expressions. The drum praise, *Kala Ekulema Nembe, Kala Ekulema Nembe, Ama doko doko biokpo*, still reflects how the Nembe remember their past.⁵

Contact between Nembe and Opuama continued through marriage, trade and other shared activities. These ties kept relations going, even though disputes over land, fishing areas and authority were not absent. The name *Seibiri* later gave way to *Opuama*. This change came from within, not from outside. By the late colonial period, things were no longer the same. Earlier ways of organising life had begun to weaken. New systems of rule and new forms of economic activity took their place. The Civil War made this more difficult. Movement was no longer easy, trade slowed down and contact reduced. This study follows these changes up to 1970. Examining both groups' responses to these pressures provides insight into how crises reshaped identity and intergroup relations, highlighting the significance of this study. The significance of this study lies in its potential to preserve the history and evolution of intergroup relations between the two groups, much of which survives in collective memory. It

¹ E.J. Alagoa and A.M. Okorobia, *Nembe Se Congress: A Study of the United Approach to Development in Nembe Se* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publication, 2010), 1; E.J. Alagoa 'Traditions of Origin' in E.J. Alagoa (ed.), *The Land and People of Bayelsa State: Central Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publication, 1999), 2-93.

² Chief Vinnima Deo, interviewed in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, 13 May, 2025.

³ Deo, 2025; Alagoa and Okorobia, *Nembe Se Congress*, 2010, 1.

⁴ E.J. Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta: An Interpretation of the Ijo Oral Tradition* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publication, 2005), 113-114.

⁵ E.J. Alagoa, *The Small Brave City-State: A History of Nembe Brass in the Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publication, 1964), 1.

also highlights key themes in Niger Delta history. This study examines the evolution of relations between Nembe and Opuama up to 1900 and identity transformation over time.

Empirical Review

Existing empirical scholarship on the Niger Delta shows that intergroup relations and processes of self-definition among *Ijaw*-speaking communities developed through historically contingent conditions rather than fixed primordial affiliations. Alagoa's reconstruction of Niger Delta history anchors this understanding by showing that communities cannot recover memories of their earliest migrations into the region, while oral traditions preserve accounts of internal dispersal within the Delta. This view places Nembe and Opuama within the same migratory background linked to Obiama, rather than treating them as groups with separate origin claims.⁶ He also shows that communities in the Delta formed their identity through movement, settlement and contact. On this basis, Nembe and Opuama are better seen as related groups whose differences developed later through social and political change.⁷ Alagoa's study of Nembe Brass further demonstrated how political centralisation and leadership actively shaped group formation and intergroup relations in the central Delta. In Nembe, the rise of figures such as Kala Ekule marked a shift towards a more structured political order, one that went beyond kinship and found expression in governance, trade and diplomacy. This gave Nembe a stronger position in the area, but its relations with communities such as Opuama did not rest on constant conflict or domination. Its influence was also exercised through these forms of interaction, not force alone. Alagoa and Okorobia affirms this interpretation by showing that unity, adaptation and negotiation defined Nembe historical experience. Their study illustrated that Nembe leaders regulated engagement with neighbouring groups through indigenous mechanisms such as cooperation and conflict management instead. Their findings challenged the antagonistic narrative of intergroup relations and presented interaction as a normal and sustained feature of Niger Delta social life.⁸ In this setting, relations between Nembe and Opuama followed a similar course. Shared origin, social ties and economic links reduced sharp divisions; even as separate communities took shape.

Eferebo discussed the dynamic nature of intergroup relations by showing how nineteenth-century economic development reconstructed relations between the coastal and inland communities. The expansion of the palm oil economy changed movement, settlement and power relations in the area. It drew Nembe traders inland and brought them into steady contact with groups such as Opuama. Eferebo noted that the practical needs and mutual dependence shaped these encounters. At the same time, differences in wealth began to matter more and affected how groups viewed one another.⁹ Changes in identity between Nembe and Opuama followed from these shifts in economic relations. Jones considers the same process within the Niger Delta more broadly. He shows that the growth of the palm oil trade changed the nature of intergroup relations. Exchange became more regulated and tied to access and political advantage. Competition did not lead only to conflict. It also required adjustment and helped to organise relations between groups.¹⁰ For Nembe and Opuama, increased trade brought closer contact but also made differences clearer. Contact continued, though with limits, and these differences reflected changing economic conditions rather than fixed hostility.

Ibuomo and Daniel redirect attention to Opuama by foregrounding its agency in intergroup relations. They show that Opuama groups took an active role in shaping identity through movement, ritual practice and exchange.¹¹ Igboro further clarifies the regional context by showing how Nembe exercised influence over neighbouring groups through economic leverage, political authority and cultural prestige rather than sustained coercion. These practices shaped regional perceptions and produced asymmetrical but negotiated relationships, helping explain why naming

⁶ Alagoa, *The Small Brave City-State: A History of Nembe Brass in the Niger Delta*, 1-10.

⁷ Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta*, 113-117.

⁸ Alagoa, and Okorobia. *Nembe Se Congress*, 2-93.

⁹ I. Eferebo, *Nembe and Her Neighbours 1800-2008*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 140-156.

¹⁰ G. I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963) 140-146.

¹¹ L. S. Ibuomo., and K. Daniel, 'Opuama and Her Neighbours: A Study in Intergroup Relations, 1960-2010', *South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2020), 125-140.

practices and social labels gained greater significance as Nembe prominence expanded.¹² Okorobia and Olali analyse colonialism's impact by showing how conquest and administrative restructuring disrupted indigenous authority and reshaped ethnic consciousness in the Niger Delta. Colonial rule weakened established hierarchies and introduced new bases of belonging rooted in education, Christianity and access to colonial institutions.¹³ In Nembe–Opuama relations, colonial intervention shifted interaction from customary regulation to colonial mediation and reshaped how both groups understood themselves through shared experiences of marginalisation. Enemugwem and Mgbowaji show that trade was the main link in Nembe–Obolo relations long before the Atlantic slave trade. Systems of credit and trust supported canoe exchange and created lasting economic dependence. The movement of Nembe canoe carvers into Obolo territory encouraged cultural exchange and the transfer of skills. Traditions of shared ancestry also strengthened the sense of connection between the two groups. Although their study focuses on Nembe and Obolo, it gives useful insight for examining the economic relationship between Nembe and Opuama, especially the importance of trade, migration and mutual dependence in shaping intergroup relations.¹⁴

The existing literature explains how migration, political organisation, trade and colonial rule shaped identity and intergroup relations in the Niger Delta. It offers a illuminating insight for understanding shared origins and sustained interaction among communities. However, these studies did not treat Nembe–Opuama relations specifically as a continuous historical process from their shared beginnings through the colonial era and into the Nigerian Civil War period. They also paid limited attention to how identity formation and changes in naming reflected shifts in status, perception and relations between the two groups over time. This study addresses that gap by examining Nembe–Opuama relations across the precolonial, colonial and Civil War periods, using oral and secondary sources to show how evolving interactions shaped both identity and name change.

Social Identity and Historical Experience in Nembe–Opuama Relations

Social Identity Theory explains how group identity is formed and reshaped through interaction, comparison and shared historical experience rather than through fixed ancestry alone. It emphasises that collective identity is relational, emerging from how groups define themselves in relation to others within changing social, political and economic contexts. The theory was developed in the late 1970s by Henri Tajfel and later expanded with John Turner. Their work demonstrated that group identity is fluid and context-dependent, shaped by processes of categorisation, perception and relative group status.¹⁵

The historical experiences of Nembe and Opuama show that group identity developed and shifted through interaction, comparison and shared circumstances rather than through fixed lineage alone. In the early period, shared ancestry traced to Obiama, sustained interaction through trade, intermarriage and ritual exchange and the absence of rigid boundaries produced a flexible sense of belonging in which Nembe and Opuama identities were relational and mutually reinforcing. Identity at this stage was situational, shaped by cooperation and everyday social practice rather than by sharp differentiation. As relations evolved, identity became increasingly shaped by perception and evaluation.¹⁶ The change from Seibiri, originally a descriptive cultural term, to Seibiri with negative connotations shows how external labelling shaped how the Opuama group was perceived and, in turn, how it responded. The later acceptance of the name Opuama was a conscious effort to assert dignity and autonomy, marking a move away from imposed negative labels towards self-chosen identity.¹⁷

Colonial intervention further reconfigured identity by altering relative status and access to power. The erosion of Nembe's position as a regional middleman reshaped its sense of collective standing, while Opuama's engagement with Christianity, education and new economic opportunities provided alternative bases for social recognition.

¹² J. Igoro, 'Nembe Hegemony over Ogbia in the Central Niger Delta from Pre-Colonial Times', *Port Harcourt Journal of History and Diplomatic Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, (2022), 149–160.

¹³ A. M. Okorobia and S. T. Olali, 'Ethno-Nationalism and Identity Conflicts in Nigerian History: The Niger Delta Situation to 2012', *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2012), 441–448.

¹⁴ J. H. Enemugwem and B. R. Mgbowaji, 'Canoe, Gin Trade and Obolo–Nembe Relations', *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 6, (2016), 47–50.

¹⁵ H. Tajfel and J.C. Turner, 'An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict', in W.G. Austin and S. Worchel (eds), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publication, 1979), 33–47.

¹⁶ Alagoa and Okorobia, *Nembe Se Congress*, 1; Alagoa 'Traditions of Origin', 92–93.

¹⁷ Deo, 2025; Alagoa and Okorobia, *Nembe Se Congress*, 2010, 1.

These changes did not dissolve intergroup relations but transformed them, as both groups adjusted their self-understanding within a reordered political and economic environment. The Nigerian Civil War intensified these processes. Wartime insecurity disrupted trade networks, mobility and everyday interaction, replacing earlier openness with fear and caution. Shared experiences of violence, loss and marginalisation reshaped how Nembe and Opuama perceived themselves and others.¹⁸ Identity increasingly came to be defined by vulnerability and endurance rather than by hierarchy or economic advantage, fostering a more defensive but also more solidaristic group consciousness.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the Nembe–Opuama experience demonstrates identity as a historical product of interaction, comparison and response to changing conditions. Migration, naming practices, economic reorganisation, colonial domination and war shaped how both groups understood who they were and how they related to one another. Identity shift in this context was continuous and adaptive, reflecting the capacity of Nembe and Opuama to renegotiate belonging and intergroup relations in response to shifting social realities while sustaining historically grounded ties.

Intergroup Relations and Identity Shifts between Nembe and Opuama Groups in the Precolonial Era

The historical relationship between Nembe and Opuama is best understood as a process through which shared ancestry gradually gave way to differentiated group identities shaped by migration, ecological adaptation, political organisation and evolving intergroup perceptions. As Emeritus Professor E. J. Alagoa has observed, the oral traditions of Ijaw groups across the Niger Delta do not preserve memories of their earliest entry into the region, which are considered too remote to recall. What endure instead are traditions of internal dispersals within the Delta itself.¹⁹ These remembered movements provide the framework through which groups articulated origin, belonging and difference, explaining why the histories of Nembe and Opuama, like those of other Ijaw groups, are embedded in intra-Delta migrations rather than in distant narratives of first arrival. Within this framework, both Nembe and Opuama trace foundational aspects of their origin to Obiama, a settlement located in the Okoroma axis of present-day Nembe Local Government Area, bordering Southern Ijaw and Ogbia LGAs. Scholars such as Alagoa and Okorobia identify Obiama as one of the key centres from which early internal migrations radiated.²⁰ My informant, Chief Vinnima Deo noted that Obiama as the dwelling place of Obia, whose descendants became ancestors of several Ijaw groups. Okpo and Boma, his two sons, emerged as progenitors of the lines of descent that later developed into separate settlements. Okpo founded Okpoama referred to as the father of Kala Ekule, a notable figure in the early history of Nembe. From Boma came Opu, regarded as the ancestor of the group later known as Opuama.²¹ Even with separation, the connection remained as line of descent still points back to a common ancestry.

Tensions at Obiama preceded dispersal and marked the first phase of identity differentiation. Oral evidence attributed the primary cause of the crisis to disputes over leadership authority and the control of communal affairs, while written accounts, linked the cause of the crisis with a ritual incident involving the sharing of a hare during an annual ceremony performed to ward off harmful influences and promote fertility among women.²² In this version, the perceived inequity in distribution was interpreted as a breach of accepted norms and civic rights, which provoked conflict. Although these versions differ in explanation of the immediate cause of the dispersion, both point to the crisis as the moment when a once unified community began to disintegrate, setting in motion dispersal and the formation of new identities.

¹⁸ E.N. David, 'Economic Development of Nembe Local Government Area: From Earliest Times to the 21st Century, Unpublished BA History Project, Rivers State University, Rivers State, 2023, 79.

¹⁹ Alagoa, 'Traditions of Origin', 92.

²⁰ E.J. Alagoa and A.M. Okorobia, *Nembe Se Congress: A Study of the United Approach to Development in Nembe Se* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publication, 2010), p1; E.J. Alagoa 'Traditions of Origin' in E.J. Alagoa (ed), *The Land and People of Bayelsa State: Central Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publication, 1999), pp 92-93.

²¹ Chief Vinnima Deo, oral interview conducted by author at his residence, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, 13 May, 2025.

²² Deo, 2025; L.S. Ibuomo and K. Daniel, 'Opuama and Her Neighbours: A Study in Intergroup Relations, 1960-2010' *South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2020), 129.

The dispersal produced two major migration streams that introduced ecological and spatial differentiation. Bomo and the Tarakiri group moved inland into the freshwater zone, where fishing and farming became central to subsistence and social organisation. The Kala Ekule group, one of the early Nembe migration streams, moved coastwards, establishing littoral settlements such as Okpoama, Odioama, Twon and the Cape Famosa communities of Beletama, Egweama and Liama. These Life in the inland areas was not the same as along the coast. People farmed and fished differently. Trade moved in other ways. Political arrangements also differed.²³ Inland settlement encouraged freshwater-oriented livelihoods, while coastal settlement fostered maritime trade, canoe-based mobility and expansive political engagement. The movement from Obiama had already separated them in space, and with time, it showed in identity as well.

A more explicit identity shift emerged after Opu and his descendants established their settlement, initially known as Sei. The name, derived from Opu's renowned dancing ability, reflected a cultural identity grounded in music, performance and communal display. Oral accounts, particularly given by Chief Vinnima Deo recount that renewed contact between Nembe and Opuama after dispersal was regulated through a spiritually sanctioned oath binding both groups to mutual loyalty under threat of death for violation.²⁴ The oath helped to hold relations in place. It checked rivalry and tied both sides to shared spiritual expectations.

This oath regulated the relations between the two groups. It reduced the likelihood of rivalry, enhanced morally controlled interaction, and strengthened common ancestral ties. Further economic developments in the nineteenth century reconstructed their patterns of relations as both groups were shaped by trade, mobility, and power. Eferobo notes that between 1830 and 1850, the rise of European interests and demand for palm oil led to higher prices and significantly impacted the growth of commercial activity across the region. Although coastal polities initially had the upper hand in this trade, Nembe became a major participant in the mid-nineteenth century. The Nembe–British Treaty of 1856 strengthened their position. Trade also changed during this period. The slave trade declined, and palm oil became more important in exchange. In the aftermath of this treaty, Nembe traders extended their commercial influence inland, particularly toward the Orachi River and Oguta Lake regions, bringing them into regular and sustained contact with Opuama.²⁵

Oral accounts from Chief Bright Agele and Chief Vinnima Deo suggest that relations between both groups at the initial phase were cordial and economically motivated, with little or no evidence of hostility or misunderstanding. As the Nembe traders extended their economic expedition to Opuama territory during the period, they became familiar with their indigenous life and sociocultural activities. One feature that stood out was the pronounced passion for music and dance. From these everyday encounters came the name Seibiri, meaning “those who love to dance.”²⁶ At first, the name was just a description. It was not used in a negative way.

An economic misunderstanding between the local people and visiting Nembe traders led to the use of the name Seibiri, meaning “bad people” to identify the local people. The name negatively affected how Opuama was seen by other groups. Initially, it started during early contact with Nembe traders, later, Neighbouring groups took it up, and it later appeared in colonial records, since that was the name officials came to know and could easily spell. The shift in naming did not pass without effect. It shaped how the group was spoken about and how others dealt with them in daily life, especially in contact with Nembe and nearby groups.

Even so, the growth of inland trade did not lead to constant conflict between Nembe and Opuama. Contact continued, and tensions were handled through discussion and adjustment rather than open conflict. Rather, it produced a pattern of intergroup relations characterised by negotiation, accommodation and mutual dependence. Opuama groups became integrated into Nembe's expanding palm oil and palm produce economy as producers, collectors and transit points, while Nembe merchants facilitated access to coastal markets and European trading

²³ Ibuomo and Daniel, 'Opuama and Her Neighbours', 2020, 129; J. Igoro, 'Nembe Hegemony Over Ogbia, In The Central Niger Delta: From Pre-Colonial Times', Port Harcourt Journal of History and Diplomatic Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2022), 153; Alagoa and Okorobia, *Nembe Se Congress*, 1.

²⁴ Deo, 2025.

²⁵ I. Eferobo, *Nembe and Her Neighbours 1800-2008*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State., 2013, 114.

²⁶ Deo, 2025; Chief Bright Agele, interviewed in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, 9 May, 2025.

firms. Although the entry of new trading actors intensified competition within the Niger Delta, Nembe and Opuama adapted by adjusting their economic strategies and extending trade into neighbouring spheres rather than resorting to confrontation.²⁷ Over time, monopolistic tendencies emerged in the palm produce economy, but within the Nembe–Opuama axis these pressures were moderated through established trading practices, kinship ties and social relations. As Jones noted, the competitive structure of the palm oil economy transformed an open trading environment into one governed by regulated access and negotiated boundaries, reinforcing structured interaction rather than commercial warfare.²⁸

Intergroup relations between Nembe and Opuama were shaped not only by conflict but also by diplomacy, religion and shared cultural practices. Ibuomo and Daniel recount that during a Nembe war expedition advancing toward Opuama, the force approached the four-river confluence known in Ijaw as *niyan torububou*, located within the mangrove swamp boundary zone between present day Nembe, Ogbia and Opuama in the eastern Niger Delta. At this point, an unusual incident reportedly occurred in which the cry of a newborn was heard inside the war canoe, despite no infant having been present at departure. The discovery of a baby said to be surrounded by blood was interpreted as a grave omen. Consequently, the expedition was abandoned, and consultation with a spiritual authority led to the warning that proceeding with the invasion would result in defeat and wider unrest in Nembe.²⁹ Acting on this counsel, Nembe initiated contact with Opuama, which was followed by the swearing of the *Ovou* (oath) at *niyan torububou*. The oath formalised a sacred covenant and peace pact binding both communities to mutual non aggression and peaceful coexistence, with the belief that violations would attract spiritual sanctions and communal misfortune.³⁰

The relations of both groups were strengthened by trade through markets such as Akamabugo, Tarakiri, and Ogbia. Inter-marriage played a role in creating kinship ties that built trust, encouraged cooperation in fishing and trading, and reduced tendencies of conflict. Joint exploitation of riverine resources relied on shared ecological knowledge and the interdependence of both groups. Cultural exchange perfectly shows how close the groups interacted: The Omungu Aru (war canoe) tradition, the Iworoko dance, and masquerade practices linked to the Nembe Sekiapu were taken up by the Opuama and adapted to their own setting, where they became known as Ekpete (music).³¹ These examples demonstrate the dynamic nature of identity as it was neither static nor imposed; rather, it was continuously negotiated through sustained intergroup contact.

Impact of Colonialism on Intergroup Relations and Identity Shift between Nembe and Opuama

The colonial period changed relations between Nembe and Opuama. Earlier patterns of interaction, authority and identity did not remain the same. One important event was the Nembe–British War, which ended Nembe’s political and commercial independence and strengthened British control in the central Delta. Before this time, relations between the two groups were based on shared ancestry, ritual ties, trade and local forms of diplomacy. Colonial rule disrupted this system and placed British authority at the centre of relations. Before its defeat, Nembe controlled trade routes and acted as a middleman between inland producers and coastal markets.³² This position ended after the war. Colonial authorities took over trade, taxation and administration. As a result, Nembe lost its earlier influence, and its relations with Opuama changed. What had been managed through local practices now followed colonial direction.

Administrative changes made this shift clearer. The creation and reorganisation of protectorates, provinces and divisions in 1900, 1906 and 1914 brought new boundaries. They cut through existing ties and made earlier forms of contact difficult to maintain. Relations between Nembe and Opuama were no longer based mainly on shared ancestry and access to resources. Instead, they came to follow colonial arrangements. Identity also became linked to administrative divisions and closeness to colonial power. Education and Christianity also played a role. Twon-Brass became an early centre of missionary work and Western education in the central Niger Delta. Schools such

²⁷ Agele, 2025.

²⁸ G.I. Jones, *The Trading Status of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development in the Eastern Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 146.

²⁹ Ibuomo and Daniel, ‘Opuama and Her Neighbours’, 135.

³⁰ Ibuomo and Daniel, ‘Opuama and Her Neighbours’, 135.

³¹ Deo, 2025; Rev. Numo David, interviewed in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 23 June, 2025.

³² A.M. Okorobia and S.T. Olali, ‘Ethno-Nationalism and Identity Conflicts in Nigerian History: The Niger Delta Situation to 2012’, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2012), 443.

as St Barnabas Primary School and St Luke's at Ogbolomabiri brought people from Nembe and Opuama together.³³

Oral accounts show that children and adults from Opuama often travelled to Nembe for schooling. This helped to build ties through shared learning and Christian teaching. As a result, identity began to change. Access to education, church membership and new opportunities became more important, alongside older ties of lineage. Christianity strengthened these links. Missionary work later moved from Twon-Brass into nearby communities such as Opuama, bringing people into closer contact and encouraging shared ways of life.³⁴

Christianity assumed a more localised and permanent presence in Opuama with the arrival of the missionaries in the early twentieth century. Their activities led to the establishment of Saint Stephen's Anglican Church and an accompanying school, which became the earliest centres of Christian worship and Western education in the community. This marked Opuama's first enduring Christian institution and signified a gradual departure from exclusive reliance on indigenous religious systems. Ibuomo and Daniel observed that this initial phase of Christian consolidation was later reinforced through sustained Nembe contact, which facilitated the establishment of St. Stephen's Primary School, Kemeingbene in the 1920s.³⁵ Through these institutions, Christianity moved beyond itinerant evangelism to become firmly embedded in the social, educational, and cultural life of Opuama. New forms of worship, moral authority, and social organisation were introduced, gradually reshaping collective values and self-understanding. Christianity therefore became an important part of Opuama's communal life and also strengthened ties with Nembe through shared religious affiliation.

This process of identity transformation deepened in the mid-twentieth century with the arrival of Scripture Union in the 1950s, which strengthened Christian consciousness through structured Bible study, youth mobilisation, and moral discipline. The subsequent acceptance of African Indigenous Christian movements, particularly the Cherubim and Seraphim, reflected a phase of cultural adaptation in which Christianity was reinterpreted through familiar symbolic and ritual forms. The contemporary religious landscape of Opuama therefore testifies to the depth, continuity, and permanence of Christian transformation within the community.

Colonial interaction also relied heavily on coastal intermediaries. Nembe and Brass residents served as interpreters, messengers and commercial agents in hinterland areas, including Opuama.³⁶ They served as a link between European firms, missions and local communities. Through this, trade and cultural contact increased, and colonial ideas also found their way into local life. This role had mixed effects. It kept Nembe visible within the colonial system, but it also placed both Nembe and Opuama under the same colonial order. This position had mixed effects. It kept Nembe visible within the colonial system, but at the same time placed both Nembe and Opuama within a shared position under colonial rule. As this happened, identity began to change. It came to depend more on access to education, missionary connections and trading opportunities, rather than only on local status. Marriage ties also helped to strengthen these new forms of relations. Strategic intermarriages between Nembe, Opuama and neighbouring groups expanded networks of cooperation, eased tensions generated by colonial disruption and fostered socio-cultural integration across group boundaries. Through kinship, identity became relational and adaptive, shaped by social ties that transcended earlier rigid distinctions.

Colonial intervention therefore reconstituted Nembe and Opuama within a fundamentally new relational order, transforming both intergroup interaction and collective identity. The erosion of Nembe's indigenous political and economic dominance compelled a shift from the identity of a regional middleman power to that of a colonially mediated group negotiating diminished authority through education, religion and commerce.³⁷ Within the same historical framework, Opuama identity evolved through accommodation and selective engagement with colonial opportunities, particularly Christianity and Western education, which redefined moral values, social organisation and notions of belonging. Nembe–Opuama relations were consequently recalibrated away from indigenous hierarchy and customary regulation toward patterns shaped by shared negotiation of colonial power, economic

³³ Deo, 2025.

³⁴ Deo, 2025; David, 2025.

³⁵ Ibuomo and Daniel, 'Opuama and Her Neighbours', 136.

³⁶ E.N. David, 'A Historical Survey of Plant Based Industry of the Nembe Se: A Springboard for Sustainable Development in Nigeria', *Jurnal Ilmu Sosiologi Dialektika Kontemporer*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2025), 319.

³⁷ Okorobia and Olali, 'Ethno-Nationalism and Identity Conflicts in Nigerian History', 443-444.

dependency and cultural transformation, laying a foundation for subsequent identity negotiation in the post-colonial period.

Intergroup Relations and Identity Shift in Nembe–Opuama Relations in the Post-Independence Period, 1960–1970

The post-colonial period between 1960 and 1970 marked a decisive phase in the transformation of intergroup relations and collective identity among the Nembe and Opuama groups. At independence in 1960, relations between Nembe and Opuama were largely cooperative. Trade networks, shared waterways and everyday contact kept both groups closely connected. Exchange with the Igbo hinterland and other Ijaw communities created mutual dependence, and identity was shaped more by occupation and daily life than by strict ethnic divisions. At the time, there was a general expectation that this pattern of cooperation and movement would continue across the Eastern and Central Delta. This did not last. In the years after independence, the Nigerian state struggled to provide effective governance and security in the Niger Delta. Neglect from the centre, poor infrastructure and the marginal position of minority groups weakened confidence in the new nation. These conditions formed the background to the political crisis of the mid-1960s. The coups of 1966 and the declaration of Biafra in 1967 led to the Nigerian Civil War, which affected even riverine communities far from the main battle zones.³⁸

During the war, relations between Nembe and Opuama changed. Movement became risky, and everyday security broke down. Although both groups tried to remain neutral, this became difficult to sustain. State authority weakened along the waterways, and soldiers and other armed groups exercised control without restraint. Routes that had once supported trade and contact became places of fear. Traders, canoe owners and farmers were often suspected of spying. Markets declined, and some fishing settlements were left deserted. The effects on social life were serious. Economic activities that once supported cooperation now carried risk. Women traders, who were active in riverine exchange, faced harassment and violence³⁹ Oral testimony from Atei Mark Okorobia recalls the killing of his father during an economic expedition,⁴⁰ showing how indigenous economic activities could become dangerous. These were not isolated cases. They reduced trust, not only between Nembe and Opuama but across the region.

These changes also reshaped their identity. Things were no longer the same. Relations with the Igbo, which had been built around trade, began to shift. People became unsure of one another. Among Ijaw groups, including Nembe and Opuama, relations were difficult: as some routes and markets that people once used freely were now avoided. People became more careful. They watched where they went and who they dealt with. The ease that had existed before faded. Life was no longer as open as it had been.

By the end of the war in 1970, relations between Nembe and Opuama had clearly changed. Trade had weakened, movement was limited and everyday contact had reduced. The hopes of independence gave way to shared experiences of insecurity and marginalisation. The war did not just interrupt relations; it changed how both groups dealt with each other and how they saw their place within the Nigerian state.

Conclusion

This study examined how Nembe and Opuama related with each other over time and how their identities took shape from a shared beginning up to 1970. The material used, including oral accounts, migration histories and patterns of exchange, shows that their relationship did not rest on fixed divisions. It changed as people moved, settled and dealt with new conditions. Both groups traced their origin to Obiama, but over time they formed separate communities. Even so, the link between them remained. In the earlier period, relations grew out of kinship, marriage, trade and ritual ties. These were part of everyday life. There were no sharp boundaries in the modern sense. Identity was not fixed. It often depended on occupation and local conditions.

The change of name also makes this clear. The earlier form, Seibiri, meant “people who love to dance” and was used in a descriptive sense during early contact. Over time, this shifted to Seibiri, which carried a negative meaning, “bad people.” The name did not remain accepted. It was later set aside for Opuama, a name the people chose for themselves. This was not just a change in name. It showed a move away from an imposed label and a

³⁸ E.N. David, *Economic Development of Nembe Local Government Area: From Earliest Times to the 21st Century*, Unpublished BA History Project, Rivers State University, Rivers State, 2023, 79.

³⁹ David, *Economic Development of Nembe Local Government Area*, 81-82.

⁴⁰ Professor Atei Mark Okorobia, interviewed in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 13 March, 2025.

clearer effort to define identity on their own terms, even while their link with Nembe remained. Colonial rule changed things. Older political and economic arrangements began to weaken, especially after the Nembe–British War. Nembe’s earlier place in trade declined, and new forms of authority developed under colonial rule. Administrative changes, missionary work and Western education introduced new ways of organising life. Even with these changes, contact between Nembe and Opuama did not end. It continued through trade, schooling, religion and marriage, though not in the same way as before. The civil war between 1967 and 1970 had a deeper effect. Security broke down, and movement along the waterways became risky. Trade suffered, and everyday contact reduced. What used to bring people together could no longer be done in the same way. Movement became difficult, and in some places unsafe. Trust did not hold as before. Both communities faced similar difficulties, and this shaped how they saw themselves within the Nigerian state. Looking across these periods, identity did not stay the same. It shifted with movement, contact and crisis. Relations between Nembe and Opuama were not always steady. At times they were close; at other times they were strained. Still, the link between them remained, even as conditions changed.

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