POST-ABOLITION NIGER RIVER COMMERCE AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY IGALA POLITICAL CRISIS

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Introduction

Generalizations concerning whether the Atlantic slave trade and the impact of its abolition were of transformative significance to African societies continue to be refined.\(^1\) Research efforts using local case studies have been important in this process.\(^2\) This accords with the suggestion by Robin Law that disaggregation might be one of the ways to resolve the controversies in the discourse. As he observed,

the experience of all regions of western Africa was evidently not the same. First, the Atlantic trade (and therefore, presumably, the nineteenth-century transformation of its nature) was not equally important for all West African societies—it was clearly of critical importance for coastal communities which lived, essentially, by trading, such as Bonny and other Niger Delta communities; of less but still considerable importance for societies immediately behind the coast, such as Asante and Dahomey; and presumably diminishing importance for societies situated further inland, and perhaps of none at all for some very remote or isolated societies, which may have been wholly unaffected by the Atlantic trade.\(^3\)

Law has also called for a determination of the chronological variations between different states and regions in the decline of the export slave trade. There should also be a delineation of which societies were able or unable to supply agricultural produce for the new trade, irrespective of whether or not they had participated effectively in the slave trade.\(^4\)

In the first local study of the impact of the abolition of the slave trade on a West African society, Kenneth Dike argued that it caused drastic changes of revolutionary proportions with severe disruptions in sociopolitical structures. The slave class assumed economic superiority over the free, and the slaves' attempt to adjust their political standing to correspond with the economic reality created the political crises of nineteenth-century Niger Delta states. These crises, which he termed slave revolts, catapulted the slaves into positions

of political parity with or outright superiority over the freeborn. In his words, "the slave revolts brought full emancipation to thousands of the domestic slave hierarchy and made for great improvements, socially as well as economically, among the slave masses." The basic institution through which these changes became operational was the "house" or as G. I. Jones called it, the "canoe house." R. Horton, like Dike, believed that the nineteenth-century house system was brought into being by the slave trade. On the other hand, E. J. Alagoa disputed the idea that the stimulus for the changes in the Niger Delta house structure was the slave trade or its abolition. He argued that the evolution of the lineage institution into a corporate kin unit that incorporated non-kin members and entrenched a more liberal sociopolitical atmosphere for all members began before the Atlantic slave trade. This evolution had its origin in the newly competitive nature of the relationship among the Delta lineages when they moved from farming villages to fishing villages, and when they transformed their settlements from fishing villages to trading states. The transformation was also based on the commitment of the people to internal long-distance trade. Thus, the slave trade and its nineteenth-century abolition only accelerated an ongoing process of internal development. Alagoa denied that there were any slave revolts in the Niger Delta. Susan Hargreaves took a similar position. However, and most useful for our purpose, they all identified the canoe house and the changes it underwent as very important in the social and political developments that convulsed the Niger Delta in the nineteenth century.

This article, in line with Alagoa’s perspective, will demonstrate that the economic and social structural transformations within a group of Igala clans, caused by their participation in the Niger River trade, were related to the sociopolitical crisis the nineteenth-century Igala kingdom experienced. A. G. Hopkins’ development of Dike’s political crisis theory into a crisis of adaptation theory is equally important for our consideration. Hopkins observed that the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the introduction of legitimate commerce caused the warrior and slave-trading classes to lose control over income from overseas trade. The fact that small-scale traders and ordinary peasants and women were now able to successfully participate in trade drastically curtailed the incomes of the warriors and other slave-trading groups. The warrior class’s reaction, Hopkins argued, was the fundamental cause of the endemic warfare among the Yoruba in the nineteenth century. In the cases of the Niger Delta and Yoruba states, the common factor in the causes of the crises was the relative change in the economic statuses of social groups caused by the dynamics of export production for legitimate commerce.

This aspect of the discussion has also been a matter of contention. Case studies by Ralph Austen, John Latham, and David Northrup suggest that the
loss of rulers’ control over legitimate commerce and income from it has been overstated. Different aspects of the palm oil export production process such as gathering (or upstream production on the farms), transportation, provision of credit, and marketing of produce for export were still retained under some form of control by the rulers. Thus, as Law suggested, the various issues in dispute cannot be generalized over the whole of the region, and they need to be examined in terms of particular West African states and societies during particular periods of the nineteenth century.

The present article takes a cue from the current trend towards disaggregation. It is a study of the interior West African kingdom of Igala, far away from the coastal belt of the Niger Delta states and their immediate hinterland Igbo neighbors. As well as being at a long distance from the Atlantic shores, the Igala kingdom did not produce palm or palm kernel oil as the major items of its “legitimate” commerce. This analysis argues that though the Igala participation in “legitimate” commerce was largely indirect, this participation still impacted the social and political developments in the nineteenth-century Igala kingdom. The effect was to catalyze some changes within the social structures of a section of the Igala society. This in turn produced conditions that led to a protracted political crisis lasting almost until the British takeover of the kingdom.

This article argues that the nineteenth-century Igala political crisis was analogous to the crises of adjustment in the Niger Delta and Yoruba states postulated by Dike and Hopkins. It argues that the balance of sociopolitical forces built into the Igala monarchical system was disrupted, and the successive nineteenth-century attahs (Igala kings) lost much of their power over important groups of their subjects. They had to contend with recurrent attempts by rebels to establish independent political power bases on the fringes of Igala territory. The reason for all this, it is contended, was the palace’s increasing loss of control over the commerce and income of the nineteenth-century Niger River trade to a group of increasingly economically and politically influential non-royal riverine clan heads and their economic establishments made up of kin, slaves, and clients. This gave the crisis a revolutionary character. The article examines the Niger River trade of the Igala clans and the character of these “clans” to see how, like the Niger Delta canoe houses, they came to constitute the socio-structural bases of the changes under discussion.

The Crisis

By the mid-nineteenth century, it was clear that the Igala central government was in a weakened situation. A contemporary observer who since 1841 had
remained conversant with political developments in Idah commented in 1867 and 1872 that

Abokko [Okeyin] has removed to his farm Oko-Okein about 14 miles above Idah, and Agaidoko about 12 miles above Onitsha—no one can call them to account. The Atta has no power at all out of Idah, no sooner they quitted the town into the river, they are out of his reach and defy him. He has no fleet of canoes in his service.¹⁴

The government of the Igara country is as weak as ever; the power of the present Atta does not seem to have greater influence over his subjects inhabiting the banks of the Niger, than that of his predecessor¹⁵

The problem was intermittently contained by the central government up to 1841. It took a critical turn for the worse in the period from the 1860s until the British takeover of Igalaland.

The Igala length of the Niger banks played host to a number of rebels from Idah, the Igala capital, in the first half of the nineteenth century. The area witnessed the rise of colonies established by over-mighty subjects of the attah of Igala who decided to carve out independent political and economic spheres for themselves in the years before 1840.¹⁶

Sometime around 1826, political problems in Idah forced the leader of the Abokko Onukwu Ata clan, old Abokko, and his people into exile at Adamugu. The politics involved in the election of the reigning attah had pitted the leadership of the Abokko riverine clan against the candidate that eventually succeeded to the throne. The successful attah either drove out old Abokko or the latter himself went into voluntary exile.¹⁷

However, the problem was not just between the attah and his clan on the one hand and the Abokko clan on the other. The Abokko clan was one of several riverine clans, and one of three major clans that were in keen and conflictual competition with one another. Each of these major clans, with their less powerful allied clans, generally supported different lineages out of the four that produced the king. Hence, economic rivalry among the riverine clans and the politics of royal succession to the attah's throne have been used in the past to explain old Abokko's exile and the general political crisis that befell the Igala in the first half of the nineteenth century. The argument was that whichever one of the three riverine clans supported the lineage of the successful royal candidate came into favor, while those that opposed it lost favor and were either marginalized or, in more critical cases, run out of town.¹⁸ This was how most of the Abokko clan, led by their clan head, quitIdah metropolitan area
and other towns to build Adamugu and its two satellite market towns of A'ra and Uto between 1826 and 1832. Once outside the immediate reach of the king, the Abokko clan was able to act even more "independently of the Atta." Its members were able to conduct military raids for their personal interests.

A number of other Idah nobles who, for one reason or another, were in opposition to the attah also founded new colonies with their supporting clan members and clients during this period. Onua, close to Adamugu, was an example. According to W. B. Baikie, it "was built by the son of a former Atta, who was compelled to leave Idda, being too fond of thinking and acting for himself." The incumbent head of the Agabidoko clan also established a colony far away from Idah on the bank of the Niger at Igokeyi below Adamugu. Another town, Amidokoko, was also established in similar circumstances, though by the time of its observation, its "proprietor" was said to live at Idah.

In the Igala political set-up, the competition and political balance among the three major riverine clans involved their sharing of control over different portions of the riverine areas of the Igala kingdom. Thus, the Agabidoko clan had charge of the River Niger downstream from Idah, the Omogbaje clan controlled the waterside area at Idah, and the Abokko clan superintended the districts on the river up to the confluence with the Benue.

Between 1832 and 1841, the Abokko clan had become so powerful that it overturned the balance of power among the riverine clans and between itself and the palace. The Niger exploration party of 1841 reported that the Abokko family had great power and influence. They observed that one of old Abokko's sons, "Okien, succeeded him in the government of the town and territory of Adamugu; another, Edina, is the Nufia, or 'Captain of the Port;' while his brother, Anieh Aboko, is the Annajah, or Governor of Addakudda, and all the district in the neighborhood of the confluence, subject to the attah of Idda." The 1854 exploration party reconfirmed this favored position. Abokko's sons were said to be "scattered over various towns and districts, wherever their adherents live, or they possess property. A'ma-Abokko, the eldest, succeeded to Igbegbe, as that was his mother's country."

Since specific land areas within Igala towns and villages inhered in particular lineages, the various towns and districts over which the Abokko clan had charge increased as its members colonized new territories and attracted immigrants and traders. Also, these settlements were more directly subordinated to the political dictates of the Abokko clan heads in a manner that transcended the parameters of the political powers of clan heads in the traditional clans.

By mid-1854, conflicts between the riverine trading clans of Abokko, on the one hand, and Agabidoko, supported by the royal clan and the ruling attah, on the other hand, were renewed. Military clashes occurred between the rival
clans. Consequently, the town of Oko-kein was made into a fortified military observatory by the Abokko clan to guard against surprise attacks from its adversaries. More members of the embattled clan moved out of Idah and other vulnerable areas to Otuturu and Gbebe. They moved into territories north of Idah that were a little removed from danger and from direct metropolitan control. Ikiri, the most important market on the lower Niger between 1838 and 1854, was under the control of the Abokko clan. When clan members moved out of Idah and from territories south of Idah, the market moved with them to their new colonies. It was observed that "divisions and party quarrels" had caused "a great portion of the population, chiefly Abokko's party" to evacuate Idah.

Parts of the town they used to occupy are overgrown with luxuriant grass... Those who left the town are residing all along the left bank, from Adamugu, a great way towards the Confluence, hence the number of villages which go by the name of Abokko, or some one or other of his children.

With the death in 1863 of the chief of Gbebe, Ameh Abokko, and the refusal by a substantial portion of the members of the Abokko clan and the population of Gbebe to accept the attah's choice of candidate, civil war broke out in Gbebe. The contenders in the conflict sought allies among the neighboring towns and for the next thirteen years, the entire confluence area became a military theater. As a result of the blockade the rivals erected against each other from their various island camp settlements, traffic on the Niger became hazardous. The number of war camps increased and warrior lords multiplied. The military-political hold of these lineage war-leaders on their followers increased as the skirmishing and the battles dragged on. The extreme weakness of the attah and the metropolitan Idah political center was highlighted as the course of military-political developments was taken entirely out of their hands during this period. Nor were they able to force a lifting of the blockade of the River Niger during periods when the warring parties blocked traffic. The warlords entered diplomatic relations with neighbors and exercised the power of life and death, even over people of noble birth. Until the Niger Company brought the Igala under colonial rule, the attah and the Idah metropolitan authority, even with the help of clans that were supportive of the ruling lineage, failed to force the leading rebel groups into submission.

Thus, what began initially as a demographic/political movement of new and more independent colonies rising on the fringes of Igala territory soon developed into a practically unmanageable political condition for the central government in Idah. The local leadership assumed more and more authority
and control over socioeconomic, political, and military processes in their settlement areas. When a succession dispute broke out, they seized the occasion to demonstrate their virtual disregard of the Igala central authority. They carried on the government of their settlement areas in total defiance of the attah and at an economic loss to Idah. Either independently or encouraged by the obvious military-political decline of Idah, mainland groups of Igala to the northeast started showing restiveness. It took a year’s military campaign by the attah to bring the situation under control.\textsuperscript{30} The internal weakness of the Igala central authority puts into perspective Idah’s inability to drive out the Bassa who migrated into Igala territory south of the Benue in the middle of the century.\textsuperscript{31} It also formed the backdrop to the gradual loss of Igala’s right-bank Kakanda subjects to the Nupe.

The Traditional Framework of Igala Central Government

The crisis described above was caused by the gradual unraveling of the social structural arrangement that had held the various sociopolitical components and sectors of the Igala community in a balance. The economic and political fortunes of the various clans within the Igala state and the ruling lineages and the corresponding political power relationship between them experienced considerable changes during the nineteenth century. The changes were linked to the different levels and ways in which the clans and lineage groups, the royal clans and sub-clans included, related with the post-abolition Niger River commerce. In this section, however, I analyze the sociopolitical power structure that upheld the Igala state and enhanced the military-political power of the central government over all sections of the Igala society before the onset of this crisis.

The Igala social and political community was composed of clan organizations and territorial communities.\textsuperscript{32} The kingdom was composed of a number of clans, each comprising in turn lineages and, in some cases, sub-lineages. The various lineages and sub-lineages composing a clan claimed that their ancestors were related to the original founder of the clan, usually in prehistoric time. Igala clans were not fixed to particular territories and members were dispersed in various towns and villages all over the nation “with occasional concentration in certain places.”\textsuperscript{33} Particular political titles were often associated with particular clans. Territorial arrangements included hamlets and group of hamlets that constituted villages. A number of villages constituted a district. A group of districts constituted a province, usually under the leadership of the head of a royal sub-clan residing in the territory.\textsuperscript{34}

The attah in his capital at Idah headed the central government with the assistance of a set of titled officials from royal and non-royal clans. Some of the
hereditary royal titles rotated within the four sub-lineages of the ruling house. Other royal titles were reserved for members of royal sub-clans that lived in the provinces. These officials were attached to “fiefs” from which they collected tribute, only a portion of which went to the attah. The non-royal titles were held by the Igala Mela, the nine kingsmakers who headed their respective clans, as well as by the chiefs of another set of clans. These latter chiefs were heads of what J. S. Boston called the subsidiary clans. These “combined the function of land-chief with the duty of assisting the king of the central government in some more specialized capacity.”

These chiefs from the subsidiary clans headed a group of about twenty clans living mainly in the riverine districts of the state, the Abokko, Agabidoko, and Omogbaje being the most influential of the group.

A critical issue in the arrangement was that the duties and spheres of action of the branches of the central government counterbalanced each other. As the head of the royal clan, the king exercised authority over the greater Idah metropolis where the majority of the royal sub-clans resided. The attah also exercised some limited influence over the affairs of provincial royal sub-clans. He controlled appointments to their headships, and through this means was able to increase his area of practical reach in the kingdom. In this manner, through the royal sub-clan heads in the metropolitan and provincial areas, the palace was reckoned to have governed at least half of the total area of the Igala kingdom directly. The titled heads of royal sub-clans were “the highest administrative and judicial authorities in the areas concerned, with the right to receive tribute, settle disputes, and try all serious criminal offences that threatened the peace of the districts under their jurisdiction.”

The kingsmakers, however, were counterpoised to the attah. The Igala Mela controlled election to the throne and oversaw the rotation of the office among the four lineages of the ruling house. Moreover, as the body representing the indigenous landowning clans, the right to land was vested in the Igala Mela and, as such, they were considered the de facto owner of the land. The attah had no such right over land, other than as the head of his own clan and over the land that his own clan held in trust for its members. The head of the Igala Mela, the achadu, had his own official residence or palace, and like the attah, he also maintained a considerable retinue of clients, retainers, and slaves. The relationship between the rights and the offices of the attah and the Igala Mela is significant. It formalized the sovereign political supremacy of the former over the entire Igala kingdom. At the same time it limited the king’s ability to directly participate in local government. It also seems clear that the inheritance of land rights in the clans rather than in the central government curtailed the extent to which the attah could directly withdraw economic surplus on the basis of the distribution of land to farmers or immigrant settlers. In this sector, the attah
received revenue only in so far as the titled royal sub-clan heads were willing to share the tribute they collected from their provinces.\(^39\)

The titleholders from the subsidiary clans were in an intermediate position between the royal titleholders and the non-royal Igala Mela clans. They were “poised between the royal clan, with its traditions of an inherent right to rule, and the kingmakers, who represent the rights of the non-royal population, both ritually and politically.”\(^40\) As a result of their specialized duties and administrative roles in the service of the attah, as well as the direct access they had to the palace, these titleholders counterbalanced the high statuses of the two other orders of titleholders, their lower status notwithstanding. Their roles in controlling the river trade, providing canoes for military and other official functions, and collecting tribute from their areas of influence on behalf of the attah made them, separately or corporately, into important economic functionaries that the attah had to rely upon.\(^41\) However, the competition entailed in the performance of the specialized duties of these clans precluded their corporate unity and the danger they might, as a united group, have posed to the power structure of the state. Moreover, this competition provided a lever with which the attah could pit the officials and their clans against each other. In the process of maintaining his hold on them, the attah could ensure that he received his share of the revenue from the trade they superintended.

The location of the subsidiary clans along the main river trade and transport route was strategic. The specialized duties they performed were also of strategic value. These duties of watching over the river trade, providing canoes and personnel for state functions, and collecting tribute from their areas of influence gave them advantages over other clans. These roles facilitated their greater accumulation of wealth and the higher status of their titled clan heads. The political standing of these titled officials correspondingly assumed greater importance in relation to the attah and all other royal and non-royal titleholders in Idah metropolis.

The crisis broke out in the early nineteenth century with a clear pattern of rebellion against royal control that manifested itself in the establishment by the riverine clans of independent settlements, all of which were trade ports, on the riverine periphery of the kingdom. This suggests that the pattern of Igala participation, as represented by these riverine clans, in the lower Niger River commerce of the post-abolition period was very crucial in the developments under examination.

The Clans and Niger River Commerce

A major problem of interior West African states with respect to their ability to participate in legitimate commerce was transportation.\(^42\) The Igala participation
in "legitimate" commerce, however, was not hampered by this problem. The River Niger skirted the entire western border of the Igala kingdom and the kingdom's fleet of canoes plied the route well beyond its borders down to Aboh, Brass, and Bonny. Traders from Bonny, Aboh, and Brass definitely traded to Idah and the popular Igala river markets. 43

Igala participation in "legitimate" commerce was not determined by the production of palm oil or palm kernel oil. The traditional concept of legitimate commerce as the production and supply of agricultural produce in replacement of slave trading is clearly inadequate to describe the Igala situation and is discarded in this analysis. The traditional concept neglects the dynamics of regional interrelationships between the upstream/interior and downstream/coastal peoples in the final export of produce overseas. The interior people actively participated in the trade through the upstream supply of slave labor and foodstuffs to the downstream exporters of palm products in the Niger Delta and Igbo states. Hence, throughout the period, the Igala continued their traditional production of slaves, ivory, and domestic consumer items. The second vital aspect of Igala's participation in "legitimate" commerce was the reimportation of European goods from their southern neighbors in exchange, principally, for slaves and ivory. 44 Theirs was a "legitimate" commerce that was neither inclusive of direct palm oil export production nor exclusive of slave sales. 45 A mediated but articulated and systematic economic integration with a strong commercial link was maintained between the riverine Igala of the Niger and the Igbo and Delta societies in the nineteenth century.

The Abokko and Agabidoko clans were the major and the most visible Igala groups in nineteenth-century Niger River trade. This is not to deny that other Igala riverine and mainland clans were also involved in the domestic and trans-border trade. However, in the nineteenth-century written documents that particularly highlighted the Niger River trade, the Abokko clan had supremacy of place. Their visibility above all the others, however, was because they had virtual control of the Igala Niger commerce into and out of the greater Idah metropolitan area. The history of the Igala river ports of Ikiri, Otuturu, and Gbebe in linking the Niger-Benue confluence area to the Delta and to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic commerce has been discussed elsewhere by this author. 46 What needs to be emphasized is the fact that the members of the Abokko clan, its head, his sons, and their clients and slaves, were in direct control of the settlements at which the biggest trans-border trade fairs on the lower Niger took place from the early to the middle nineteenth century. 47 They were also some of the most prosperous and influential traders within Igalaland, and indeed, from 1832 to 1863 they had the most influence with foreign traders coming from the Delta, Igbo, and other states to exchange their goods. Indeed, they had more contact and influence with the European
trading and diplomatic missions to the Niger than any other Igala clan, the royal clan not excepted.48

It has been rightly considered that "by far the most important commodities in the lower Niger trade, in the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century were slaves and ivory."49 This of course, does not deny that a tremendous amount of articles of local manufacture and foodstuffs changed hands in these markets. Cloth and salt were especially important in volume and value.50 Merchants from Bonny, Aboh, and Benin came to Ikiri and Otuturu to buy ivory and other articles. One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Ikiri market as reported by European visitors in 1834 was the loud advertising of ivory sellers.51 R. A. K. Oldfield reported that his party saw a considerable amount of ivory every week being carried down the river in relay to Bonny, New Calabar, Benin, and other coastal areas.52 The most considerable purchases of ivory made by various Niger exploration parties were in the Igala port towns and generally along the Igala portion of the Niger.53

Ivory and slave trading went hand in hand in these markets.54 Almost all trade in ivory from Ikiri downstream to Aboh and Bonny reported by the 1832-34 Laird and Oldfield expedition was in connection with slaves.55 Trade representatives from Bonny were trading to Idah and Ikiri markets in the 1820s and 1830s, buying slaves for their masters with European trade goods like "rum, iron bars, and cloth."56 Ikiri and Gbebe were notable slave markets, particularly for buyers from further south.57 Trading fleets from Aboh came up as far as Gbebe, and some Aboh traders went as far as Panda to buy slaves. Three generations of Abokko clan heads and their sons were not only important traders, but notable slave dealers too.58

For as long as the Igala clans in charge of this vital foreign trade operated within the traditional political and ideological framework, they could be expected to make the necessary returns to the attah from whatever revenue they derived from their control of commerce. However, as shown earlier, from the 1820s, as a result of directly rebellious acts against the attah, a number of settlements were established by these clans, becoming their most important settlements and becoming established as trading and custom ports. The clan heads that established these ports outside the direct control of Idah were, therefore, able to corner all the trade and custom revenues from the commerce that passed through them. This was soon followed by military and diplomatic activities independent of the central authority at Idah. All this experience increased their economic wellbeing. This, in turn, reinforced their independent political spirit. Consequently, political and economic events at the periphery under the control of the Abokkos and Agabidokos started to diverge from the traditional balance that had held the various sectors of the metropolitan political class in equilibrium.
From Clans to Trading Establishments

The crucial issue at this point is the impact of this commercial freedom and wealth on the social composition of the riverine clans and on the political power of the clan heads. An additional question is how the change in these social sectors impacted on political processes at the central government level. Originally, titled officials from the riverine clans did not possess the advantage of a powerful ritual counterpoise to the political power of the attah, as did the Igala Mela. However, over the years, the riverine clan leaders demonstrated their possession of a different form of leverage, which was of equal importance. This was "the greater strategic importance of their sphere of influence." As Boston rightly observed,

the control of the riverine markets was one of the economic mainstays of the traditional system of kingship, and the river was also relatively more significant at the military and political level than the border areas inland. It is this difference in economic and military potential that accounts for the differences in organization between the subsidiary clans and the kingmakers.\(^59\)

Conditions analogous to those identified by Horton, Alagoa, and K. Nair in the transformation of the lineage systems of the farming and the fishing villages into the dynamic house systems of the Niger Delta are discernible in the Igala riverine clans' situation.\(^60\) The context of the commercial competition within which the lineages of the riverine clans operated produced changes in their constitution. This is because, as Boston observed for these clans, "riverine politics are basically more dynamic than the power situation associated with control of the inland borders and [there was a] relatively greater scope for competition."\(^61\)

The majority of the Igala were farmers, and each clan ordinarily had fixed land areas over which its members had usufruct. However, the riverine trading clans, and especially the leading three, depended less than the others on farming and land use rights for their economic wellbeing.\(^62\) They were essentially traders and administrators of trading areas, and they relied on their ability to control a greater portion of the River Niger and its banks, as well as commerce and transport over it, than their rivals. Since the control of traffic did not need to be fixed to a spot, as right in land was, their activities necessarily involved intense competition among them, and between them and the foreign traders together with whom they visited markets outside the Igala borders.

This internal and external competition involved the clans in military conflicts.\(^63\) As in the lineages of the Niger Delta fishing villages, this type of
competition established an urgent need among the riverine Igala clans for a policy of recruitment into the component trading lineages that could more easily increase their fighting, trading, and canoe-paddling forces. Since the leaders of the Abokko clan were themselves slave traders, it was easy for them to recruit suitable elements from among the slaves they traded in. Ameh Abokko, whose sub-lineage carved out Gbebe for itself, directly raided some Agatu groups on the Benue for captives in the mid-nineteenth century.64 Such raiding would meet both the domestic and the trading needs of his lineage group and of the entire clan.65

Since the post-abolition lower Niger and Niger-Benue confluence commerce was water-borne, canoe transport was of enormous importance to the competing lineages and clans. Slaves, ivory, salt, foodstuffs, and imported European manufactures were transported much more efficiently and economically in large trading canoes. Thus, the river commerce, as well as the transportation of travelers and traders for a fee, endowed trusted slave canoe-paddlers with considerable value.66 Gbebe slaves, as transporters and traders, constituted inestimable manpower resources for their masters and mistresses. Consequently, the disposal of home-held slaves in the mid-nineteenth-century Igala trading establishments was rare.67

These slaves were also the fighting forces for their masters, and they traveled armed and ready to fight against trespassers or attackers. The important commercial roles of the slaves allowed them to have intimate touch with and a measure of control over "factors of production," including canoes, trade goods, and money. Not only could they withhold (and must have withheld) portions of their earnings, they were also allowed to conduct, on their personal account, small trade in items they had accumulated. They were allowed to own small amounts of property and to travel out of the reach of their masters. Of course, they also often worked together with their masters and with free agents or relatives of their masters.68 Their roles as traders and trade canoe-paddlers helped to incorporate the slaves as pseudo-kin, clients, and pseudo-affines into the trading lineages of their masters and into the clans generally.69 Successful slaves were manumitted and established themselves as independent traders who in many cases still operated under the protection of their masters' lineages. Their wealth and expertise were still put to the service of the clan and the clan head. It was said of Okoro, an old slave of Old Abokko, that he

was ever regarded as a member of the family, himself having many grown up children in the house, and prospered well in trade, by which he gained much influence and commanded due respect. . . .

During Akaia's [an Abokko clan contestant to the Gbebe
headship's] troubles with his brother Abaje, Okoro stood by and supported him as a faithful friend and father, he spared neither property nor men to aid him.  

Such notable individuals married wives and over two or three generations were virtually integrated into the clan.  

The general mid-nineteenth-century conditions in Igalalaland may have started the transformation of slave status and slave use patterns. However, the dynamics of the competitive local and trans-border economic and military engagements of the riverine clans clearly intensified the process among them. The result was the demographic, economic, and military-political enlargement of these clans. They not only absorbed more and more slaves, but they also attracted immigrants, traders, and scholars from outside the I gala kingdom. Moreover, unlike mainland clans that were dispersed over wide areas of the kingdom, the specialization of the riverine clans in river-borne economic activities imposed a logic of demographic concentration on the trading members and their slaves around their few market-settlements and the banks of the Niger. This had military significance in terms of quick mobilization for attack or defense purposes. The overall effect of this process was to heighten the value of slaves as military and commercial personnel. Slaves, as soldiers, pirates, bodyguards, and enforcers, provided the edge that the contenders in the Gbebe conflict of 1863 onwards had over one another at one time or another, and the mainstay of their independence and defiance of the Idah central authority. The slave-operated war canoes of the aggrieved parties blockaded various points on the Niger.  

This perspective refines this author's analysis in a previous study that described the significance of slave incorporation into the social and economic structure of the Abokko clan settlement of Gbebe. It was stated in the previous analysis that lineage-based social units of production were giving way to "slave-infused military/commercial ‘clan’ units' like the Abokkos and the Agabikdokos and that both familialistic/communalistic and slave modes of productions clearly had begun to be grafted onto the stream of the expanding mercantile capitalist system that followed the introduction of legitimate commerce to the lower Niger. The expansion of slavery and slave labour to service the increasing commercial opportunities over the Niger served to transform the very basis of political power in Gbebe and the Niger-Benue confluence area. The incorporation of slaves, immigrants and refugees into the community saw the lineages being expanded, diversified, cosmopolitanized and, in the
process, transformed into new and non-traditional structures. Loyalty to political leadership and political fortune ceased to be based on mere primogeniture.73

The influx of immigrants and traders into the settlements that were established by these clans initiated a particular political responsibility on the part of the clan or lineage head. Since the community over which he was head was generally outside the direct political and economic control of the palace and other central government officials at Idah, his political position appreciated beyond that of the ordinary clan head. In the same vein, the patronage of the trading settlements of these clan heads by foreign traders produced and reinforced the transformation in the clan heads’ political influence, power, and status, again in ways analogous to what happened in the Niger Delta states. Because visiting traders had to pay duties and customs and depended on the authority and power of the head for their safety, the scope and competence in foreign affairs of these riverine clan heads increased. These advantages, together with a clan head’s own trade, “increased his political power and consequence,” first within his clan and particularly in his immediate trading settlement.74 At this point, the situation had become greatly different from the normal Igala clan organization. Some of the riverine clans had emerged to become corporate trading establishments, complete with military and political powers that were closely parallel to those of the central government at Idah.

The growing economic and demographic strength of the riverine clans, and especially of the Abokko clan and their supporters between 1832 and 1854, with their transformation into corporate trading establishments, impacted on the attah in directly opposite ways. The greater portion of the international riverine commerce, and consequently the local commerce that fed into it, was taken away from the control of the attah and the royal clan heads in the metropolitan Idah area. International patrons of the Abokko markets followed these markets every time they moved from an old to a new settlement. This must have been a major revenue shift to the disadvantage of the palace, the royal clans, and Idah.

By 1854, the Abokko establishment was observed to be in “command [of] the market from Aboh to the confluence.”75 The principal Niger River Igbo long-distance traders as well as traders from beyond the confluence to the north consequently abandoned Idah and Ikiri when the Abokko clan moved. The merchants followed them to their new trading settlements of Otuturu and Gbebe.76 William Baikie observed that “trade has completely departed with Abokko’s party, who, at Ututuru, hold extensive markets, which are attended by people from a great distance.”77 Old Abokko, Ameh Abokko, chief Agabidoko, and other trade/war chiefs that rose in these areas overshadowed
the attah at Idah in the practical economic and military matters regarding their areas of operation. In line with what were observed to be the powers of Ameh Abokkto, the head of the Abokkko sub-lineage that established itself at the Gbebe trade settlement, the Niger explorers interacted with him as “king” even though they knew he was in theory a non-royal titled Idah official. In fact, Ameh Abokkko was independently negotiating with Masaba, the Nupe king, to cede to the latter the area that eventually developed into Lokoja. This was a territory the attah had given to the 1841-42 Niger commissioners for a settlement. Abokkko claimed that it was his land and the earlier arrangement was without his blessing. The outbreak of the Gbebe conflict over the succession to the Onojaship of Gbebe demonstrated the new status, power, and wealth that the position commanded. This was the reason why the contenders and the attah were bent on maintaining their influence on the succession to the position.

The attah tried as best he could to maintain his share of revenue from foreign trade by monopoly measures. It is not clear when these measures were put into place, but they were in operation by the 1830s. It is possible that these royal monopolistic policies came into effect in the attempt to reverse the weakening grip of the Idah palace on revenue from foreign commerce over the Niger and the Benue. The attah had first choice of European articles brought to Idah from the Delta. At Idah, some prestige articles like velvet were forbidden to slaves and common people. Hausa brokers from the north, who normally received fixed commissions for their services, were also forbidden to operate, it seems, in areas where the attah’s traders operated. The attah had to rely on what his own trading agents could get him in their competition with the traders of the riverine establishments. The withdrawal of trade from the capital city and its vicinity by the Abokkko seemed to have nullified these royal privileges of the attah and reduced his scope of operation.

Conclusion

The changes in the structural composition and economic fortune of the riverine Igala clans and the political problems these caused seem to have started early in the nineteenth century. This was prior to the period when the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade could have had any practical effect on the Igala. There is no evidence that the Igala ever had any problem exporting trade slaves to the south up to the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Over a long period of time, the slave economy had created a slave production sector in the kingdom and had thus increased the importance of slave labor. The nineteenth-century urban Igala slave population was no doubt considerable, but its size does not constitute evidence of a local slave glut resulting from constraints on Igala exports. If anything, the early nineteenth-century incursion of the jihadist Nupe
emirate into Idah’s political sphere of influence and the weakening of the Igala’s hold on some of their tributaries may have curtailed their overall slave production capabilities. Hence, the nineteenth-century structural changes and the attendant political crisis were more the general result of the Igala’s long-time participation in the lower Niger River (and confluence area) export trade with their southern neighbors, which involved a great deal of slave sale. The crisis could not be related to problems of slave glut, due to any effective slave trade abolition in the Igala kingdom.

That riverine rather than overland commerce was the most critical in this transformation is clear from the fact that only the clans situated along and having control over the Niger River route were involved to any large extent. It bears stressing that the Igala involvement in legitimate commerce went hand in hand with slave trading. This double advantage enhanced the economic value of the Niger River commerce. It accentuated the competition among the riverine clans and affected the attempts of the monarchy to control the increasing independence of the clans by pitting them against each other and the riverine clans’ support of the positions of rival royal sub-clans against each other. Overall, the effects of this trade constituted the economic basis for the nineteenth-century Igala political crisis. The structural changes in the riverine clans that were produced by their economic activities challenged the political arrangement in the Idah metropolis. The result was that the balance of the political, economic, and demographic power relationship was disturbed.

This article gives the impact of the post-abolition Niger River commerce a decisive role in the crisis that plagued the Igala in the nineteenth century. However, pre-nineteenth-century commerce and, perhaps, commerce predating the Atlantic slave trade between the Igala and their neighbors on the Niger may have initiated the changes that reached their climax in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, there was a clear increase in appreciation of the Niger’s significance as a major route of interterritorial and interregional trade during the nineteenth century. Consequently, the various sections of the Igala central government, and particularly the attah, the Igala Mela, and the riverine clan heads in the Idah metropolitan area, must have quickly come to a recognition of the wealth and power that accrued to whichever group had the most control of commercial traffic in Igala territorial waters.

While the point is not pressed here, it is possible that Idah had been impacted by what seems to have been a larger sub-regional economic decline between 1830 and 1840. During this period, the Niger slave-trading traffic of the communities within the Niger-Benue confluence area experienced an observable drop. This would have resulted in reduced earnings for all who, in Idah and the riverine areas, had previously enjoyed considerable revenues from the trade. Such a fall in profit could have been one of the factors that induced
the competition and the problems among the riverine Igala clans and between some of them and the palace. However, an alternative explanation is also possible. Since the earliest conflict between the Idah palace and the Abokkko clan head in the nineteenth century is dated to the 1820s, it is equally possible that the crisis reflected the general boom in Niger-River slave traffic noted for the 1820s, which the various Idah groups wanted to corner. Either could have accounted for the economic competition and the subsequent political and military problems that developed among the various ruling groups in Idah. It was the eventual drop in this boom that was reflected for the Niger-Benue confluence area as a fall in slave sales.

The analysis here supports the extension of a modified version of the concept of the "crisis of adaptation" to the area of West Africa beyond the immediate coastal hinterland of the Ijaw, Brass, and Igbo people, thus further refining the generalizations of Webster, Hopkins, and Dike. In major respects, the importance of the Igala riverine clans' role in the Igala crisis clearly correlates with Alagoa's emphasis on the transforming principle of the house institution for the nineteenth-century developments in the Niger Delta.

However, unlike the claims made by some studies for the Niger Delta societies during their crises, there was no liberalization of the Igala slaves' social and political conditions in general. Economic prosperity was also generally confined to the noble classes. This was due to the fact that export production of palm oil and kernels did not occur among the Igala, as it did in the Niger Delta and among the Yoruba. Igala slaves as a class, therefore, lacked the economic and social opportunities that would enable them to challenge or supplant the ruling and free classes. Though the ruling class made use of slaves in their intra-class military, political, and economic competition, the crisis in Igalaland was totally unconnected with any form of threats from or agitation by the slave class. However, slave labor within the riverine clans definitely increased in value, and as elite slaves, those slaves who constituted the economic and political power bases of the competing riverine clans were better treated and could become individually rich over a lifetime.

Looking at nineteenth-century social and political developments in the Igala kingdom, the comparable primary social unit to the Niger Delta canoe house was the Igala riverine clan. It was the unit that experienced sociopolitical metamorphosis, and provided the basis for the larger nineteenth-century political developments whose transformation impacted so drastically on the configuration of political power. The riverine clans were the conductors through which the shock waves of post-abolition commerce manifested themselves in the interior West African society of the Igala.

While the changes analyzed here were not all necessarily caused by the
single factor of commerce, by the nineteenth century the commercial factor was critical in affecting developments in the Igala kingdom.

Notes


4Ibid.

5Ibid., 150-65.

6Ibid., 159.


12Hopkins, “Economic Imperialism,” and *Economic History*.


14C. Crowther to H. Venn, 1867, quoted in J. S. Boston, The Igala Kingdom (Ibadan, 1968), 111.


17Boston, Igala Kingdom, 111-13.


19Baikie, Narrative, 290-91.

Ibid.

20Ibid.

21See Boston, Igala Kingdom, 109-10.


23Baikie, Narrative, 291.

24The Agabidoko clan had the charge of the waterway from Idah to Adamugu, and their headman was so close to the aatah that the 1832-34 Niger exploration party erroneously believed him to be "the current Igala prime minister." Laird and Oldfield, Expedition into the Interior of Africa, vol. 2, 34-35; Boston, The Igala Kingdom, 109-10; Baikie, Narrative, 281; S. Crowther, Journal of an Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers, Undertaken by MacGregor Laird, Esq., in Connection with the British Government in 1854 (London, 1970), 54, 71-72; T. J. Hutchinson, Narrative of the Niger, Tshadda, and Benue Exploration Including a Report on the Position and Prospects of Trade up Those Rivers: With Remarks on The Malaria and Fevers of Western Africa (London, 1966), 58.

25Ibid., 34.


28Boston, Igala Kingdom, 113.


POST-ABOLITION NIGER RIVER COMMERCE


An exhaustive analysis of this is found in chapter 3 of Boston, Igala Kingdom.


Ibid., 208.

Ibid., 105.

Ibid., 53-54, 81.

Ibid., 81.

Ibid., 90.

Ibid., 27.

Ibid., 28.


If the contribution of slave labor in the coastal supply of produce is put in its proper place, the interior slave-exporting areas like the Igala kingdom must be considered to have been very vital to the development of nineteenth-century legitimate commerce. Compare with Robin Law's limited questioning of the concept of legitimate commerce in "Transition from the Slave Trade," 2.

This situation is not totally dissimilar to Ann McDougall's observation for the Sahel/Sudan in "In Search of a Desert-Edge Perspective: Sahara-Sahel and the Atlantic Trade," in Law, From Slave Trade to "Legitimate" Commerce, 231; or to Latham's observation for Calabar of the parallel sectoral nature of production of oil and slaves in Old Calabar; or Northrup's view in "The Compatibility of the Slave and Palm Oil Trades."

Kolapo, "Trading Ports."

Baikie, Narrative of an Exploring Voyage, 286; Crowther, Journal of an Expedition, 171.

Kolapo, "Trading Ports."

Ogwahga, "Historical and Traditional Evidence," 195.

A list of local articles exchanged at these markets, in Laird and Oldfield, Expedition into the interior of Africa, vol. 2, 180, 181, includes yams, beans, cloth, iron bars, knives, rice, goats, fowls, calabashes, mats, country beads, horses of a small breed, kola nuts, guns, powder, cottons of a showy pattern with red and blue stripes, rum, small looking-glasses, palm oil, dogs and livestock, red wood, etc.

Ibid., vol. 2, 322.

Ibid., 181.

Kolapo, "Trading Ports."

Traders in ivory also bought or sold slaves. For particular examples, see Laird and Oldfield, Expedition into the Interior of Africa, vol. 1, 132, and vol. 2, 312; Allen and Thomson, Expedition sent by Her Majesty's Government, vol. 2, 267, 334.

Laird and Oldfield, Expedition into the Interior of Africa, vol. 1, 114.


62The Lander brothers discovered that more than half the population of Adamugu left for a trading expedition to Ikiri during their stopover at the town during their first descent of the Niger. *Journal*, 229-30. For the invisibility of farming as a vocation in Gbebe, see Kolapo, “Gbebe in Mid-19th Century.”


64Baikie, *A Narrative*, 291.

65The closure of the Atlantic market for slaves has been considered the cause for the increased use of slaves in local economic production in West Africa. See Lovejoy’s *Transformations in Slavery*.

66For the importance of slave paddle-boys to Gbebe traders, see James Thomas, *Journal of 1859*, Entry for July 12th, CMS CA 3/08.


69Kolapo, “Gbebe in Mid-19th Century.”


71For such cases see ibid.; also Laird and Oldfield, *Expedition into the Interior of Africa*, vol. 2, 183, 255, 304.


73See “Conclusion” in Kolapo, “Gbebe in Mid-19th Century.”

74See Alagoa, “Long Distance Trade and States,” 273.

75Crowther, *Journal of an Expedition*, 171.

76Ibid., 172.

77Baikie, *Narrative*, 286.

78Ibid., 271.

79This seems to have been the case for the rulers of Aboh and Rabah too.

Ibid., vol. 1, 410, 433; vol. 2, 310, 312.

Kolapo, “Military Turbulence.”
