

Research Article

Socio-Cultural Analysis of Inter-Regional Labour Migration and Cultural Fluidity in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper investigates the complex relationship between inter-regional labour migration and cultural fluidity within the Nigerian context. Utilizing a synthesis of contemporary research and empirical case studies, the study examines how internal population movements act as a primary catalyst for cultural evolution and social integration. The analysis focuses on the transition from traditional ethnic enclaves to dynamic hubs of cultural hybridity, such as Lagos and the SabonGari settlements of Northern Nigeria. By exploring the bidirectional nature of cultural influence—termed "reverse acculturation"—this paper demonstrates that migration facilitates a unique form of national identity that transcends rigid ethnic boundaries. The findings suggest that fostering cultural fluidity through labour mobility is essential for sustainable human development and national cohesion in a multi-ethnic state.

Keywords: Inter-regional Migration, Labour Mobility, Cultural Fluidity, National Integration Nigeria,

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1.Introduction

Labour migration in Nigeria is an age-long phenomenon and has been dynamic from the pre-colonial to the modern era. The changing political economy, inequity in social economic opportunities and unemployment within Nigeria are apparently major drivers of interregional labour migration within the country (Akinola,2025). Nigeria's demographic landscape is defined by its immense ethnic diversity and a long history of internal population mobility. With over 250 distinct ethnic groups, the movement of people across regional boundaries is not merely a redistribution of labour but a profound socio-cultural process.

Inter-regional labour migration has historically been driven by economic disparities, educational pursuits, and institutional frameworks such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). These movements create unique spaces where different cultural norms intersect, leading to what scholars describe as cultural fluidity. This concept refers to the adaptive and dynamic nature of cultural practices and identities as they evolve through sustained contact and negotiation.

Internal migration in Nigeria presents a rather curious but complex trajectory... internal migration contributes to development, empowerment and poverty alleviation (Oyeniyi, 2013). The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how labour mobility contributes to a "pan-Nigerian" identity. While previous researches (Oluwasegun&Ojo, 2018; Johnson, 2019; Ako, 2024; Obilor, etal, 2024; Wang, 2024 and Bello et al, 2025 among others) have extensively covered the economic impacts of migration, such as remittance flows and poverty alleviation, the nuanced socio-cultural transformations remain under-explored. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the mechanisms of cultural hybridity and the social integration of migrants in host communities. By examining the

farming (Adewumi&Fasona, 2022). Trade-related migration between Nigeria and Gold Coast (Ghana) also featured very prominently during this period and involved both males and females. Indeed, migrants have always considered West Africa as an economic unit within which people, trade in goods and services flowed freely.

Furthermore, there was hardly any distinction between internal and international migration: migration and intraregional labour migration was between neighbouring countries with similar social and ethno-cultural features. It took place on a routine basis; these factors also facilitated migrants' relocation at the destination (Adesina&Ojo, 2020). The arrival of the British in the mid-19th century provided the framework for large scale intraregional labour migration. They ushered into the country export oriented political economic policies, which completely changed the face of migration and intraregional labour migration in particular in Nigeria. New resource-rich areas in north (groundnuts and tin) and southern (cocoa, kola nuts, rubber and coal) of Nigeria were opened up to sustain the colonial policy. The need for labour to sustain the production of these resources led to rural-rural migration of people to work as either, migrant tenant workers, farm labourers, miners or migrant traders (Bello, et al. 2025). Migrant labourers were also attracted from different West African countries, such as, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Mali, Guinea, Cape Verde and Togo (IOM, 2022).

Colonial political economic policies, led to inequity in the provision of socio-economic services and infrastructure, which was skewed towards areas in the eye of the political economic interest of the Colonial masters. The rural areas were consequently neglected and virtually abandoned. This led to the intense rural-urban labour migration witnessed at the time (Oluwasegun& Ojo,2018). The expansion of cash crops to increase foreign exchange needed for the new developmental aspirations magnified intraregional labour flows to regions of production of export crops, such as, the cocoa belts in the south-western Nigeria, palm-oil in the eastern Nigeria.

In addition, the discovery of petroleum in 1956 in the Niger-delta region of Nigeria brought about immense local and international migrant labour relocation and circulation into the area. Ikwuyatum, (2016) reported that the arrival of the British in the 19th century marked a turning point and added another angle to intra and inter regional labour migration, as dictated by the colonial political economy. Modern means of transportation were built across the country and the export oriented colonial political-economic facilitated the intraregional movement of migrant labourers to the then emerging ports of Lagos, Port Harcourt and Calabar among others. The latter finding was alluded to by World Bank (2022) who stated in his work that the political economy of the country during the colonial period was such that it provided a framework for large-scale migration; deriving from the need for large labour force for mines, plantations and public administration.

Labour was recruited through persuasion and coercion. There was intraregional labour migration between the three (Northern, western and Eastern) regions of Nigeria leading to enhanced rural-rural migration of migrant tenant farmers, migrants to the tin and coal mines in Enugu and the Jos Plateau respectively. Migrant traders were not left out in this movement as goods and services were exchanged between the three regions of Nigeria (Carr, et al, 2024). The items of trade and direction of their trade also changed, from local to imported goods, mostly in a south-north and north-south direction (Ako, 2024). The seasonal movement of nomads that was noted for the pre-colonial era continued, the exceptions being movements towards viable locations in the south.

Studies on internal labour migration have also revealed that migrant labourers from different parts of the country (Adesina&Ojo, 2020; Akinbile, et al, 2023), especially from rural areas moved into regional headquarters, administrative and market centers of Lagos, Kano, Zaria, Enugu, Ibadan, Sokoto, and Kaduna, among many others, in quest of trade and gainful employment (Abubakar,2021; Adesina&Ojo, 2020). For example, Akinbile, et al (2023) reported that between 1914 and 1922 there was a noticeable immigration of foreigners into Kano and its environment. It was estimated that within this period between 10,000 and 30,000 Tuaregs from Niger Republic moved into Kano city in Nigeria (Ogunwale, 2018).

In addition,Besser, et al(2017) also reported that migrant labourers moved to locations and places involved in the Nigerian Rail line construction of the 1900s. Some of these migrant labourers were employed and some even participated in the construction of the Tema-Takoradi area of Gold Coast and the Cotonou-Parakou in Dahomey (Amare, 2023). Available data showed that between 1900 and January 1902 about 6,500 labourers left Lagos to work on the Sekondi-Tarkwa rail line and in the gold mines of the Gold Coast, where wages were higher than in Lagos. In Dahomey, many of the Nigerian emigrants took to trading after the completion of the railway, while many of them left for Ivory Coast after the World War 1. Many of the emigrants from Nigeria were attracted by evidence of success displayed by returnees; by the belief that wealth was easier to acquire while away from home and over time, as wives or new brides joined their husbands (Bello, et al, 2025).

The relatively stable and prosperous economy of Nigeria after independence and the early 1970's attracted large numbers of intraregional labour migrants within and as well as labour migrants from other ECOWAS countries, such as, Togo, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. These labour migrants were attracted to the known clusters of mining and cash crop production, regional administrative cities of Enugu, Kaduna, Ibadan, and major commercial centres and sea ports of Lagos, Port Harcourt, Calabar and Warri among others, which offered a range of employment opportunities. FGN, (2019) and Carr, et al, (2024) also reported that the third and final quarter of the 20th century, the post-independence era, witnessed heightened labour migration from several parts of the country to the main administrative and economic centers of the country and to more varied destinations than ever before. Relatively large scale of immigration into the country was interrupted by flight and or expulsion.

Moreover, the cause of human mobility had not always been economic; civil war and ethnic conflicts had spurred the dislocation of minorities from their destination back to their home region. The Biafra War of 1967-1970 recorded the largest dislocation and dislodgment of many ethnic groups from the northern part to the south-eastern and southwestern parts of the country. And for some of the people dislodged during and after the Biafra war, the option was the flight out of the country, to the Republic of Benin and to the outlying islands of Sao Tome and Principe (Gracia, 2023).

Furthermore, the immigration of ECOWAS citizens into Nigeria took another dimension after the Protocol on Free Movement of Goods, Capital and People was ratified in 1980 (IOM,2022). This almost coincided with the period of economic buoyancy in Nigeria, such that many ECOWAS citizens immigrated into Nigeria. But this was short lived; due to a sharp decline in the price of oil. Consequently, in January/February 1983 and April/June 1985, many ECOWAS citizens that had exceeded the 90 days of grace without the residence permit were expelled from the country.



In addition, by the late 1980s, some other changes in the economic and political policies of the country resulted in changes in the pattern of intraregional labour migration in Nigeria. One in particular is the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in June 1986. SAP dictated a shift from the official policy of full employment to substantially reduced government spending on critical services, such as health, education and housing. This created a greater tendency for persons to emigrate. Evidence include the relatively large number of women traders (Carr, et al, 2024) that shuttle between Lagos and Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire and in a few other coastal West African countries (Johnson, 2019; 2023).

Recent migration patterns and their underlying motives are modeled along the new forces of globalization which are transforming economies the world over. The deteriorating socio-economic conditions and deepening poverty in the late sixties and early seventies propelled a wide variety of migration configurations. Macro-economic adjustment measures and a huge increase in the number of entrants into the labour market have fueled a job crisis, creating a sustained pressure for migration (Oluwasegun&Ojo, 2018; Obilor, et al, 2024; Olaleye, 2025;). The dearth of distance has become very manifest in this era, information and communication technology hold sway in the process of intraregional labour migration. Information employment opportunities and the location of such opportunities are can easily be obtained from internet in seconds; consequently, intraregional labour migration is significantly facilitated via the various forms of globalization infrastructure.

4. Patterns and Drivers of Inter-Regional Mobility

Inter-regional migration in Nigeria is characterized by several distinct trajectories, each influenced by specific socio-economic drivers. The following table summarizes these patterns and their primary motivations. Institutional drivers, particularly the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) program, serve as a state-mandated mechanism for cultural exposure. By posting graduates to regions far from their ancestral homes, the program forces a direct encounter with "the other," challenging ethnic stereotypes and fostering a sense of shared national purpose (Umar, 2023).

Table 1. Drivers of Inter-Regional Mobility

Migration Trajectory	Primary Drivers	Key Characteristics
Rural-to-Urban	Industrialization, employment, infrastructure	Concentration in megacities like Lagos, Abuja, PortHarcourt and Kano; high ethnic diversity.
Institutional	NYSC, Civil Service transfers	Structured mobility; exposure of youth to diverse cultural environments.
Educational	Higher education, Specialized universities, training centers	Youth-led; creates intellectual hubs with high cultural exchange.
Socio-cultural	Inter-ethnic marriage, family reunification	Blending of domestic traditions and linguistic integration.

Source: Author’s Compilation

5. Case Studies: Cultural Fluidity in Practice

The manifestation of cultural fluidity is most visible in Nigeria's urban "melting pots" and specialized migrant settlements. These areas serve as laboratories for cultural innovation and social negotiation.

5.1. Lagos Megacity: A Case of Cultural Hybridity

Lagos State is Nigeria's economic and demographic hub, hosting over 20 million residents. Unlike most Nigerian cities, Lagos is not dominated by a single ethnic group. Between 2000 and 2012, 96% of Lagos's population growth came from migration, with internal migration accounting for the largest share (FGN, 2019; IOM, 2022). People move to Lagos from every Nigerian state seeking economic opportunities, education, security, and upward social mobility (Akinola, 2025). These include economic migrants from the South-East and South-South seeking trade and port-related work in Ajegunle, Ijora, and Apapa. There are also Hausa migrants from the North engaged in transport, butchery, and informal trade in Agege and Obalende. Students and professionals moving for tertiary education and formal employment are also common in Lagos. This inflow has created distinct ethno-spatial clusters (Ojo, 2024).

Lagos represents the ultimate hub of cultural fluidity in West Africa. As a financial and industrial center, it attracts migrants from every Nigerian state, while maintaining Lagos's overall heterogeneity. This constant inflow has transformed Lagos into a microcosm of Nigeria. Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Edo, and dozens of minority groups live side by side. The result is a dynamic cultural environment where traditions interact, adapt, and sometimes clash (Rasheed & Haladu, 2024). Ethnic identity often becomes secondary to a shared "Lagosian" identity characterized by entrepreneurship, resilience, and linguistic hybridity.

Migrants often adopt the dominant languages of their new environment for social integration, economic participation, and education. In Lagos, English functions as the lingua franca, while Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo dominate informal communication (Akinbami, et al, 2021; Amare, 2023). Contact between speakers leads to code-switching and the emergence of Nigerian Pidgin as a unifying urban dialect. This linguistic flexibility enhances communication across ethnic lines. The city's version of Pidgin English serves as a unifying tool, blending indigenous vocabularies with English syntax to facilitate commerce and social interaction across ethnic lines (Ikonne, 2025).

Daily interaction between diverse groups fosters cultural exchange (Ojo, 2024). Yoruba festivals incorporate Igbo and Hausa elements, while Lagos cuisine blends jollof, suya, nkwoobi, and banga soup. Music and Nollywood reflect this mixing, with artists code-switching between English, Yoruba, Pidgin, and Igbo. Such hybridization enriches Lagos's cultural landscape. Marriages between members of different ethnic groups are increasingly common in Lagos. These unions create mixed households that transmit multiple cultural practices to children, weakening ethnic boundaries and promoting national integration. Women especially gain opportunities that may be restricted in their origin communities due to cultural norms (Carr, et al, 2024). Exposure to diverse cultural norms in Lagos can shift attitudes toward gender roles, religion, and social organization, contributing to gradual cultural modernization.

Prolonged exposure to urban culture in Lagos has led to the erosion of traditional values, norms, and practices. Many migrants abandon traditional dress, festivals, and kinship obligations to fit into Lagos's fast-paced lifestyle. Second-generation migrants, born in Lagos, often have weak ties to their ancestral communities and limited fluency in their heritage language. Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo dominate public life, creating linguistic hierarchies. Studies (Umar, 2023; Akinola, 2025) show that approximately 65% of respondents experienced a reduction in their use of indigenous languages after migrating to Lagos. As younger migrants prioritize English and Yoruba for economic survival, smaller languages face marginalization and risk extinction.

However, despite Lagos's reputation for tolerance, tensions between indigenes and non-indigenes persist. Non-indigenes may face discrimination in accessing employment, education, housing, and political positions. The Certificate of State of Origin system can marginalize migrants by restricting access to public services and land. Reports of clashes between indigenes and non-indigenes in urban areas indicate that migration-related diversity can generate conflict when resources are scarce (Lamain, 2024; Rasheed & Halidu, 2024). The Nigerian Constitution recognizes freedom of movement, but subnational policies sometimes undermine integration. The discretionary power of local authorities in issuing Certificates of State of Origin marginalizes non-indigenes. In contrast, Lagos's multi-ethnic population reduces official discrimination compared to other states (Ojo, 2024; Akinola, 2025).

5.2. SabonGari, Kano: A Case of Reverse Acculturation

Internal migration to Kano, concentrated in SabonGari, has made Kano one of northern Nigeria's most culturally diverse cities. It introduced southern Nigerian languages, religions, trades, and social practices, leading to economic diversification and reverse acculturation. In Northern Nigeria, the SabonGari (New Town) settlements offer a unique sociological perspective. Originally designed as enclaves for non-indigenous "strangers," these areas have become centers of cultural diffusion. Research into SabonGari Kano reveals the phenomenon of "reverse acculturation," where the host Hausa-Fulani culture adopts elements from the migrant Southern cultures, particularly in music, cuisine, and social entertainment (Sani and Ibrahim, 2025). This bidirectional exchange proves that migrant communities are not passive residents but active agents of cultural change in their host regions.

The British established SabonGari in Kano around 1911 through the Cantonments Proclamation of 1914 and Township Ordinance of 1917. The policy separated southern Nigerian migrants—mainly Igbo and Yoruba—from the indigenous Hausa-Fulani population living in the walled city, Birni. Initially, Yoruba dominated SabonGari. In 1921, of 2,000 inhabitants, 1,478 were Yoruba. After WWII, Igbo migration surged. By the mid-1950s, 59% of SabonGari's population was Igbo, and only 24% Yoruba (Olaniyi, 2011; Ojo, 2024). The Igbo population fell during the 1966 pogroms and civil war but returned in larger numbers after 1970. Today, Igbo leaders estimate 2.5 million Igbo live in Kano, almost all in SabonGari (UK Office, 2024).

Kano is a historic Hausa-Fulani city and the commercial hub of northern Nigeria. Its cultural diversity is largely shaped by SabonGari, the "new town" created for internal migrants from southern Nigeria during British colonial rule. Internal migration turned SabonGari into a distinct cultural enclave within Kano, producing both hybridization and tension. SabonGari became a space where southern Nigerian languages, religions, and customs coexisted within a Hausa city. Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, and other groups maintained churches, markets, and social associations. About 85% of Igbo in Kano live in SabonGari, which they describe as a "home away from home". The area hosts Igbo-dominated trades like spare parts, which Igbo migrants virtually monopolize across Nigeria (Akinola, 2025; Sanni & Ibrahim, 2025).

Unlike typical migration where migrants assimilate to the host culture, SabonGari shows "reverse acculturation." Studies (Olaniyi, 2011, Akinola, 2025) find that migrant cultures have significantly influenced the Hausa host culture. SabonGari's markets, nightlife, and commercial practices introduced new consumer habits, foods, and economic models into Kano. The Hausa proverb "Baqomai ci da xangari" "the stranger eats with the indigene" —reflects this mutual influence and cultural fluidity.

Migrants introduced modern transport, automotive components, and vulcanization businesses to Kano. Southern migrants dominated formal and informal sectors before the 1960s northernization policy because they were more educated. They also controlled SabonGari market, which contributed to the decline of the traditional Kurmi market inside Birni. This shifted Kano's economic landscape and expanded cultural exposure to new goods and practices (Sanni& Ibrahim, 2025). SabonGari introduced Christian worship, English, Igbo, and Yoruba into a predominantly Muslim, Hausa-speaking city. Residents could choose between courts applying Muslim or British law. This created a bilingual, multi-religious urban space uncommon in northern Nigeria at the time (Ojo, 2024).

Kano remains largely Hausa-Fulani and Muslim, but SabonGari functions as a parallel cultural zone. This creates a layered diversity where Kano is both a Hausa city and a hub for southern Nigerian cultures. Scholars (Olaniyi, 2011; Akinola, 2025 and Sanni& Ibrahim, 2025) argue that SabonGari challenges traditional acculturation models. Instead of migrants assimilating, the host city absorbs elements of migrant culture, influencing broader metropolitan identity. Some Hausa studies note that migrants introduced social vices not acceptable in traditional Hausa culture. This reinforced negative stereotypes and limited deeper cultural integration.

5.3. Abuja: Centre of Cultural Unification

Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory, was deliberately created in 1976 to be a neutral, centrally located capital. Because of this, it has grown into one of Nigeria's strongest symbols of cultural unification. It was planned as an administrative capital, but it has become a 'melting pot' and symbol of 'One Nigeria'. Abuja is located at the geographic centre of Nigeria. It does not belong to any of the 3 major ethnic groups: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, hence, no group feels dominated. The idea was to reduce ethnic tension and create a sense of belonging for all Nigerians. By bringing together people, institutions, and cultures from all regions in one space, Abuja helps Nigerians see what they have in common rather than what divides them. It represents the ideal of 'unity in diversity' - different tribes, religions, and languages coexisting under one federal roof.

With the policy of federal character in employment and political appointments, Abuja hosts people from all 36 states. No single ethnic group is in the majority. Civil servants, business people, students, and diplomats from different tribes live and work together. English is spoken as official language, but you'll hear Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Pidgin, and over 250 other Nigerian languages daily. This daily interaction breaks down stereotypes and promotes intermarriage, friendship, mutual understanding and cultural diversity.

National Mosque and National Christian Centre are built side by side to show religious tolerance between Muslims and Christians. Public spaces are also used by all Nigerians regardless of background. Abuja Carnival, called the biggest street party in Africa is a yearly event where states display cultural troupes. Markets like Wuse, Garki, Apo, Utako and Gwagwalada are run by traders from every state. Housing estates, schools, and workplaces are shared and force people to cooperate across ethnic and religious lines. This reduces regionalism and builds a 'Nigerian identity' first, before ethnic identity.

6. Impact on Human Development and National Integration

The socio-cultural benefits of inter-regional migration extend into the realm of human development. Migration facilitates the diffusion of skills and knowledge, which are critical for economic diversification (Ojo, 2024). Inter-regional migration however leads to tensions at the host region. Despite Lagos's reputation for tolerance, tensions between



indigenes and non-indigenes persist. Non-indigenes may face discrimination in accessing employment, education, housing, and political positions. The Certificate of State of Origin system can marginalize migrants by restricting access to public services and land. Reports of clashes between indigenes and non-indigenes in urban areas indicate that migration-related diversity can generate conflict when resources are scarce. The positive impacts cultural fluidity resulting from inter-regional migration is overwhelming. Some of these are summarized in the table below:

Table 2. Impact of Cultural fluidity

Development Indicator	Impact of Migration and Fluidity	Mechanism
Education	Increased access and literacy	Migrants often move to regions with better educational infrastructure.
Social Cohesion	Reduction in ethnic parochialism	Sustained interaction and inter-marriage reduce social distance.
Economic Growth	Skill transfer and innovation	Diversity in the workforce leads to creative problem-solving and new industries.
Health	Improved life expectancy	Access to urban healthcare facilities and diffusion of health practices.

However, despite the positive trends, the process of cultural integration is fraught with challenges. The rapid influx of migrants can strain local resources, leading to competition for land and social services, which sometimes escalates into ethnic tensions (Ikonne, 2025). Furthermore, migrants may suffer from "cultural bereavement"—a psychological distress caused by the loss of familiar social structures and cultural norms (Bhugra, 2015). Addressing these challenges requires inclusive urban planning and policies that recognize the rights of "settlers" alongside "indigenes" to ensure that migration remains a source of strength rather than conflict.

7. Conclusion

Inter-regional labour migration is a fundamental pillar of Nigeria’s social and economic architecture. This manuscript has demonstrated that the resulting cultural fluidity is a dynamic force that reshapes identities and fosters national integration. By moving beyond ethnic enclaves and embracing cultural hybridity, Nigeria can leverage its diversity as a driver for sustainable development. Future policy interventions should focus on protecting migrant rights and facilitating social spaces that encourage cultural exchange, ensuring that the "melting pot" of Nigeria continues to evolve toward a more cohesive and prosperous nation.

8. Policy Recommendations

To sustain cultural diversity emanating from internal migration, while minimizing conflict, both states and Federal Government policies should promote inclusive urban planning that avoids ethnic segregation and ensures access to services for all residents. Government at both regional and Federal levels should support multilingual education that recognizes the value of indigenous languages alongside English and the major Indigenous languages.

The challenges of housing and employment discrimination should be addressed through legal enforcement and public awareness. Migrants should equally respect the traditional culture at the destination, this will foster cooperation and mutual coexistence. Finally, government should formalize and support migrant associations as bridges between communities and government.

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