

Pre-colonial Nigerian Societies: Unity and integration in historical perspective

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Abstract

Before the imposition of colonial boundaries in the late nineteenth century, societies across what is now Nigeria developed diverse yet interconnected ways of living together despite differences in language, culture, political organization, and belief systems. While existing historical scholarship frequently acknowledges pre-colonial interaction through trade, diplomacy, and migration, less attention has been paid to the everyday practices, social networks, and indigenous institutions through which unity and integration were actively produced and sustained over time. This study addresses this gap by examining how pre-colonial Nigerian societies cultivated cohesion through both formal and informal mechanisms of cooperation. Drawing on a synthesis of historical records and established secondary scholarship, the paper adopts a historical-interpretive approach to analyse political, economic, and social practices that linked communities across space and cultural boundaries. It demonstrates that long-distance trade networks, political alliances, intermarriage, patterns of migration, shared ritual life, and customary systems of conflict resolution functioned as integrative forces that fostered mutual dependence and negotiated coexistence. At the same time, episodes of rivalry, competition, and conflict reveal that unity in the pre-colonial period was neither static nor idealized, but rather a dynamic and continuously negotiated process shaped by local interests and changing circumstances. The study's findings offer historically grounded insights into contemporary debates on Nigerian national unity. By foregrounding indigenous models of collaboration that predate colonial rule, the paper challenges narratives that treat unity solely as a modern or externally imposed project. Instead, it suggests that pre-colonial experiences of integration provide valuable perspectives on managing diversity, resolving conflict, and fostering collective belonging in a plural society. In doing so, the study contributes to historical scholarship on African social organization while also engaging broader discussions on national cohesion in present-day Nigeria.

Keywords: Unity, Integration, Pre-Colonial Nigeria, Social Cohesion, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

The history of Nigeria before colonial rule presents a social and political landscape marked different from the fragmented and often contested society familiar today. While contemporary Nigeria continues to grapple with



regionalism, ethnic tension, and competing identities, pre-colonial societies across the region developed enduring mechanisms for fostering cohesion and collaboration. Among the Hausa-Fulani emirates of the North, the Yoruba kingdoms of the Southwest, the Igbo communities of the Southeast, and other groups such as the Tiv and the peoples of the Niger Delta, political, social, and economic systems encouraged interaction, cooperation, and mutual reliance. These arrangements did not eliminate difference, but they provided practical and symbolic channels through which diversity was negotiated and, in many cases, transformed into collective strength.

Economic life formed a central pillar of this integrative process. Markets and trade networks linked ecological zones, connecting farmers, herders, artisans, and long-distance merchants in mutually beneficial exchange relationships. In the North, Hausa city-states flourished through trans-Saharan commerce, exchanging local products for salt, horses, and textiles from distant regions. Trade routes extended southward, while commodities such as kola nuts and woven cloth moved northward, binding communities together in networks of interdependence. Similarly, among the Yoruba, markets in centres such as Oyo and Ife functioned not only as economic hubs but also as arenas for social interaction, negotiation, and alliance-building. These patterns underscore the extent to which pre-colonial Nigerian communities rarely existed in isolation; survival and prosperity depended upon reciprocal engagement that fostered trust and cooperation across communities.¹

Cultural practices further reinforced cohesion. Festivals, music, oral traditions, and ritual observances provided shared reference points that transcended local boundaries. Yoruba festivals often drew participants from multiple towns, strengthening regional connections and reinforcing collective identity. In northern Nigeria, the spread of Islam offered a common framework of law, worship, and education that linked communities under the Sokoto Caliphate. Among the Igbo, the absence of centralized kingdoms did not preclude social order; village rituals, age-grade associations, and customary legal practices cultivated shared norms and a sense of belonging rooted in everyday communal life.²

Political authority and traditional institutions were equally significant. Centralized states such as Oyo, Benin, and Kanem-Bornu relied on rulers whose authority combined political power with religious and cultural legitimacy, drawing diverse populations into shared systems of governance. In more decentralized societies, councils of elders, village assemblies, and collective decision-making processes fostered cooperation and managed conflict. Across these varied political formations, traditional institutions provided structured avenues for reconciliation, ensuring that disputes did not permanently rupture social relations.³At the grassroots level, kinship, lineage, and marriage further

¹Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M. *A history of Nigeria*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, Hogendorn, J. S. *Trade and politics in pre-colonial West Africa*. Cambridge University, 1994

²Falola, T. *Culture and customs of Nigeria*. Greenwood Press, 2003, Fadipe, N. *A. The sociology of the Yoruba*. University of Ibadan Press, 1970

³Afigbo, A. E. *Ropes of sand: Studies in Igbo history and culture*. University Press, 1981; Garba, A., Yusuf, M., & Ibrahim, S. Traditional institutions and local governance in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of African Studies*, 14(2), 2018 Pp.45–63.

knitted communities together across space and ethnic boundaries. Extended families, age-grade associations, communal labour systems, and reciprocal exchange practices strengthened interdependence and mitigated inequality, even in the absence of formal state structures.⁴Crucially, pre-colonial integration thrived not because conflict was absent, but because societies developed mechanisms to manage disputes, restore harmony, and reintegrate communities after periods of tension. Unity was therefore a negotiated and lived experience, shaped by continual interaction and adaptation.

Despite this historical evidence, much scholarship tends to reference pre-colonial cohesion only in passing, often treating unity as incidental to discussions of trade, governance, or culture. This paper addresses this gap by examining pre-colonial Nigerian societies through the lens of integration, asking how unity was actively produced, maintained, and renegotiated across diverse communities. The study aims to analyse the economic, cultural, political, religious, and kinship-based mechanisms that sustained cohesion, and to demonstrate how these indigenous mechanisms complicate narratives of pre-colonial fragmentation. The paper is structured as follows. After this introduction, the next section outlines the research questions and methodological approach. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical frameworks guiding the analysis. The literature review then situates the study within existing scholarship, highlighting key debates and gaps. The subsequent section presents and discusses the study's findings, and the conclusion reflects on the implications of pre-colonial models of integration for contemporary debates on Nigerian unity.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding unity and integration in pre-colonial Nigerian societies requires analytical perspectives that can account for both cooperation and tension within diverse communities. Sociological and anthropological theories are useful in this regard because they illuminate how social structures, cultural practices, and political institutions shape interaction, manage difference, and sustain collective life over time. This study draws on functionalist, structural-functionalist, and conflict theory perspectives to interpret how pre-colonial Nigerian societies fostered cohesion while responding to rivalry and change.

Functionalist Theory

Functionalist theory, most clearly articulated by Emile Durkheim, views society as an interdependent system in which social institutions and shared values contribute to order and continuity.⁵ Central to this approach is the idea of social solidarity, expressed through shared beliefs and practices on the one hand, and through economic interdependence on the other. In the pre-colonial Nigerian context, this framework helps explain how communal rituals, religious observance, and moral codes generated collective identity and regulated social

⁴Fadipe, N. A. *The sociology of the Yoruba*. University of Ibadan Press, 1970; Bohannon, P., & Bohannon, L. *Tiv economy*. Northwestern University Press, 1968

⁵Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls, New York: Free Press, 1984

behaviour. Among the Yoruba, ancestral worship and festivals reinforced moral responsibility and intergenerational continuity, while among the Hausa-Fulani, Islamic practices provided a shared ethical and legal framework that bound communities together. In Igbo societies, rituals, oracular consultation, and communal norms fulfilled similar integrative functions. The functionalist lens also clarifies the role of economic specialization and exchange in fostering cohesion. Trade networks linking farmers, herders, artisans, and merchants created systems of mutual dependence across regions, making cooperation necessary for survival and prosperity. However, while functionalism is effective in highlighting stability and integration, it tends to underplay conflict and power struggles, which were also present in pre-colonial societies.

Structural-Functional Theory

Structural-functionalism, associated with scholars such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, extends functionalist thinking by focusing on how specific institutions operate to meet societal needs.⁶ From this perspective, political councils, marriage systems, age-grade associations, and ritual institutions are understood as practical mechanisms that organize cooperation and regulate social life. In pre-colonial Nigeria, centralized systems such as the Yoruba monarchy and the Hausa-Fulani emirates relied on layered institutions including councils of chiefs, religious authorities, and judicial bodies to balance power, resolve disputes, and maintain legitimacy. In more decentralized societies, such as those of the Igbo, village assemblies, lineage systems, and age-grade groups performed comparable functions. This approach is particularly useful in explaining how unity was embedded in everyday governance and social organization. Its limitation, however, lies in its tendency to present institutions as harmonious and consensual, often overlooking contestation and inequality within these systems.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory, associated with Karl Marx and later thinkers such as Weber and Coser, emphasizes competition over resources, authority, and influence as a normal feature of social life.⁷ Applied to pre-colonial Nigeria, this perspective reveals that unity was never absolute. Political rivalry, territorial expansion, and competition over trade routes frequently generated tension, as seen in the expansion of Oyo or disputes among Hausa city-states. Yet these conflicts rarely resulted in permanent fragmentation. Instead, they produced negotiated outcomes through tribute systems, alliances, mediation by elders, and the application of customary or Islamic law. Conflict theory is valuable because it highlights how tension and rivalry could stimulate new forms of cooperation and institutional innovation. At the same time, when used alone, it risks overstating division and neglecting the shared values and norms that made negotiation and reconciliation possible.

⁶Malinowski, Bronisław. *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

⁷Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Translated by Samuel Moore. London: Penguin Classics, 2002.

When looked at together, these theoretical perspectives provide a balanced lens for analysing unity and integration in pre-colonial Nigerian societies. Functionalist and structural-functional approaches illuminate how shared values, institutions, and economic networks promoted cohesion and social order. Conflict theory, in turn, demonstrates that unity was continuously tested and renegotiated through competition and change. Combining these frameworks allows this study to capture pre-colonial Nigerian societies as dynamic systems in which cooperation and conflict coexisted, and in which integration was achieved not through uniformity, but through adaptive institutions and negotiated relationships. This integrated approach is therefore well suited to understanding how diverse communities sustained cohesion over time.

Literature Classification

Studies on pre-colonial Nigeria have show that social cohesion was maintained through a combination of social institutions, economic networks, political structures, and patterns of mobility. Communities were diverse in language, culture, and governance, yet these mechanisms helped create unity and integration over space and time. However, much of the existing literature approaches integration indirectly, often treating it as a given rather than examining it as a central question. This review engages with these studies, highlighting what is well-understood, where interpretations differ, and where gaps remain. It also positions this study as an attempt to bring unity and integration to the centre of historical analysis, focusing on the processes that actively produced cohesion rather than assuming it as a background fact.

Social Institutions and Cultural Practices

Social institutions were at the heart of unity in pre-colonial Nigeria. Kinship, marriage networks, oral traditions, festivals, age-grade associations, religious practices, and mechanisms for conflict resolution were not just private arrangements; they functioned as public instruments for creating social cohesion across communities. Scholars have long argued that these systems provided predictable patterns of interaction, moral guidance, and collective responsibility, but they often focus only on internal stability, leaving less attention on how these systems linked communities across towns, regions, or ethnic groups.⁸

Kinship remains one of the most widely recognized foundations of social organization. Among the Yoruba, compound households governed inheritance, land use, and labour, while creating strong bonds between generations.⁹ Similarly, Igbo kindreds organized labour for farming, communal projects, and defence, and resolved disputes through collective discussion.¹⁰ These networks embedded individuals within obligations to others, encouraging cooperation beyond self-interest. Yet most scholarship treats these systems as inward-looking, and less is said about how kinship ties extended

⁸Falola, T. *Economic foundations of West African states*. Heinemann, 1993; Afigbo, 1981

⁹Fadipe, 1970,

¹⁰Afigbo, 1981

between towns and lineages to form broader networks of unity. This study therefore interprets kinship not only as a stabilizing factor within communities but also as a tool that connected settlements across wider social and geographical spaces.

Marriage was another key mechanism that extended social and political connections. Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Nupe societies all used marriage to secure alliances, reinforce legitimacy, and reduce conflict between groups.¹¹ Existing studies often focus on elite marriages, such as royal or trading family unions, and leave the contribution of ordinary marriages to integration largely unexplored. By including non-elite marriages, this study highlights how everyday family ties-built networks of trust, reinforced cooperation, and helped communities manage tensions over time.

Oral traditions, including folktales, proverbs, praise poetry, and songs, have been acknowledged as vital in maintaining collective memory and moral guidance.¹² Scholars show that storytelling reinforced norms of respect, cooperation, and shared responsibility. However, much of this literature emphasizes continuity rather than the active role of oral culture in mediating inter-community relations. In reality, oral traditions also functioned as a mechanism for negotiating disputes, sustaining trust between groups, and linking communities across space. This study reads oral culture as a dynamic instrument of social cohesion, bridging generational and geographic divides. Conflict resolution practices further demonstrate the deliberate effort to sustain unity. Tiv councils, Igbo village assemblies, and Yoruba rituals emphasized reconciliation rather than punishment.¹³ While existing scholarship highlights their effectiveness within communities, there is less discussion on their outward-facing impact. This study interprets these mechanisms as ways to maintain integration beyond immediate social units, preventing local disagreements from fracturing wider networks of cohesion.

Economic Integration

Economic activity was central to sustaining social and regional integration. Trade networks, markets, craft specialization, and long-distance exchange created dependence and regular interaction between communities. Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe, and Kanuri societies all participated in these networks, producing goods that circulated widely and linking producers and consumers across regions.¹⁴ Markets played a particularly important role. In Yoruba towns, Igbo villages, and Hausa cities, markets were not only centres for buying and selling but also for sharing news, negotiating alliances, and forming social relationships (Fadipe, 1970; Afigbo, 1981; Falola & Heaton, 2008). People met regularly in these spaces, developing trust and informal agreements that

¹¹Hogendorn, J. S. *Trade and politics in pre-colonial West Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 1994; Ajayi, J. F. A., & Espie, I. *A history of West Africa* (Vol. 1). Longman, 1965

¹²Afigbo, 1981; Falola, T., & Heaton, 2008

¹³Bohannon & Bohannon, 1969; Fadipe, 1970

¹⁴Falola, T. *Economic foundations of West African states*. Heinemann, 1993; Lovejoy, P. E. *Caravans of commerce: The trans-Saharan trade in West Africa*. Heinemann, 1980

reinforced social cohesion. Many market interactions also resulted in marriages, trade partnerships, and alliances, extending networks of unity beyond single settlements.

Craft specialization reinforced interdependence. Communities relied on the expertise of others to access goods they could not produce themselves. Tiv woven cloth, Nupe metalwork, Hausa leather, and Yoruba textiles circulated widely, creating a web of mutual dependence.¹⁵ While existing scholarship often examines these patterns from the perspective of economic efficiency or state development, this study emphasizes the social consequences, showing that shared economic activity built cooperation, reinforced obligations, and sustained trust across communities. Long-distance trade networks also strengthened integration. Trans-Saharan commerce connected Hausa city-states to North Africa, while rivers like the Niger and Benue enabled movement of goods and people across vast territories.¹⁶ These networks not only facilitated economic exchange but also the spread of ideas and religious beliefs, particularly Islam, which helped create shared frameworks of ethical and social conduct.¹⁷

Political Integration

Political institutions reinforced cohesion across pre-colonial Nigeria. Centralized states like the Oyo Empire and Sokoto Caliphate maintained order through councils, taxation, and allegiance to authority.¹⁸ Decentralized systems, such as among the Igbo and Tiv, relied on participatory governance and consensus-based decision-making.¹⁹ While these studies demonstrate internal stability, they often examine each system in isolation, overlooking interactions between centralized and decentralized units. This study situates political institutions within a broader integrative landscape, showing how governance, alliances, and customary practices worked together to sustain unity across regions.

Traditional authorities, councils of elders, and secret societies played crucial roles in reinforcing political cohesion. They mediated disputes, coordinated communal activities, and upheld moral norms.²⁰ Inter-ethnic treaties, marriages, and trade agreements extended political cooperation beyond immediate communities.²¹ By analyzing these mechanisms collectively, this study highlights the ways political organization actively shaped networks of integration rather than simply maintaining order.

¹⁵Nadel, S. F. *The Nupe of Nigeria*. Oxford University Press, 1942; Falola & Heaton, 2008

¹⁶Lovejoy, P. E. *Caravans of commerce: The trans-Saharan trade in West Africa*. Heinemann, 1980; Ajayi, J. F. A., & Espie, I. *A history of West Africa* (Vol. 1). Longman, 1965

¹⁷Falola, 2003

¹⁸Ajayi & Espie, 1965; Hogendorn, 1994; Last, 1967

¹⁹Afigbo, 1981; Bohannon & Bohannon, 1969

²⁰Crowder, M. *The story of Nigeria* (4th ed.). Faber & Faber, 1978 (Original work published 1962)

²¹Falola & Heaton, 2008; Last, M. *The Sokoto Caliphate*. Humanities Press, 1967

Migration and Mobility

Movement of people was another critical factor in creating integration. Traders, artisans, scholars, and migrants traveled across regions, connecting communities through sustained contact.²² Hausa merchants linked northern Nigeria to trans-Saharan trade networks, Yoruba traders moved between ecological zones, and Nupe craftsmen and administrators carried skills and knowledge to new regions.²³ Religious scholars also facilitated shared norms and intellectual traditions across communities.²⁴ Most studies treat mobility as a byproduct of economic or political change, but this study highlights it as a deliberate integrative process. Migration allowed for the spread of culture, technology, and social practices, linking communities and reinforcing cohesion over time. Movement did not undermine unity; it strengthened relationships and created overlapping networks of interdependence.

summarily, existing scholarship provides detailed knowledge of social, economic, political, and migratory structures, but rarely examines unity as a central question. Most works focus on internal stability within single communities, leaving gaps in understanding how cohesion extended across regions, ethnic groups, and political systems. This study fills that gap by analysing integration as a deliberate, dynamic process produced through overlapping networks, shared practices, and interaction across communities. By doing so, it moves beyond description to historical interpretation, showing how unity was actively sustained, contested, and negotiated across pre-colonial Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

Social Institutions and Cultural Practices

The findings reveal that social institutions and cultural practices were more than passive elements of daily life, they were active forces that wove individuals, families, and communities together across pre-colonial Nigeria. While scholars have long noted the role of kinship, marriage, oral traditions, and conflict resolution in sustaining cohesion²⁵, this study emphasizes how these systems extended beyond internal family or village organization to link multiple communities, fostering integration across regions. Kinship structures were central not only in providing identity and social security but also in establishing networks of obligation that reached beyond immediate families. Among the Yoruba, lineage and compound households structured labour, inheritance, and access to communal resources, while simultaneously creating expectations for cooperation that extended to neighbouring compounds and towns.²⁶ A farmer in Oyo, for example, would rely on both his extended family and his lineage network for labour during planting season, while also contributing to communal defense or ritual obligations in nearby villages.

²²Lovejoy, 1980; Falola & Heaton, 2008; Last, M. *The Sokoto Caliphate*. Humanities Press, 1967

²³Nadel, S. F. *The Nupe of Nigeria*. Oxford University Press, 1942

²⁴Last, M. *The Sokoto Caliphate*. Humanities Press, 1967

²⁵Falola, 1993; Afigbo, 1981

²⁶Fadipe, 1970,

Similarly, Igbo kindreds mobilized collective labour for farming, land management, and conflict resolution, ensuring that individuals were never isolated but tied into broader webs of mutual responsibility.²⁷ These findings suggest that kinship was not simply inward-looking but operated as a connecting force, linking settlements and reinforcing trust across space.

Marriage further strengthened inter-community ties, functioning as a deliberate instrument of cohesion. While much of the literature focuses on elite marriages, the findings highlight how everyday unions among ordinary families were equally important. In Yorubaland, marriages often linked towns or villages, reducing conflict and creating social obligations that extended beyond individual households. Among the Hausa-Fulani, marriages between influential trading families and ruling elites reinforced political stability, trust, and economic cooperation across emirates²⁸ In Igboland, inter-village marriages connected communities, producing informal networks that facilitated cooperation during disputes or communal projects. The study shows that marriage actively shaped social landscapes, producing continuity and trust across groups.

Oral traditions, far from being static cultural expressions, played a dynamic role in maintaining integration. Storytelling, praise poetry, proverbs, and songs were used not only to transmit historical knowledge and moral guidance but also to mediate relationships between communities. In Yoruba towns, proverbs and folktales reinforced communal responsibility and respect for elders, guiding behaviour and sustaining networks of accountability²⁹. In the north, Hausa griots celebrated heroic deeds, recorded treaties, and narrated the migration of peoples, creating a shared memory that connected different settlements under a common narrative.³⁰ This study shows that oral culture functioned as a living mechanism of cohesion, actively shaping interactions, clarifying social expectations, and negotiating tensions between groups.

Conflict resolution practices were similarly outward-facing. Tiv clan councils, Igbo village assemblies, and Yoruba ritualized mediation emphasized reconciliation over punishment.³¹ The findings highlight that these mechanisms extended beyond resolving local disputes; they maintained the broader networks of trust and cooperation necessary for multi-community interaction. For instance, an Igbo village assembly mediating a disagreement over land boundaries would involve representatives from neighbouring towns, ensuring that decisions supported cohesion across a wider social landscape. Such practices demonstrate that social institutions were deliberately structured to preserve unity and prevent divisions from spreading beyond immediate communities.

²⁷Afigbo, 1981

²⁸Ajayi, J. F. A., & Espie, I. *A history of West Africa* (Vol. 1). Longman, 1965

²⁹Akinyemi, A. B. *Yoruba oral traditions and their cultural significance*. University of Ibadan Press, 2003

³⁰Hogendorn, J. S. *Trade and politics in pre-colonial West Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 1994

³¹Bohannon, P., & Bohannon, L. Kinship and social organization among the Tiv. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 1969, 25(2), 113-128.; Fadipe, 1970; Crowder, 1978.

Economic Integration

Economic activity emerged as another crucial driver of integration, not just through trade but through everyday interactions that built trust and interdependence. Markets were central spaces where economic exchange and social interaction converged. Yoruba town markets, Igbo rotating village markets, and northern commercial centers like Kano's Kurmi Market facilitated more than the movement of goods; they were spaces where social bonds were forged, information circulated, and marriages and alliances often began.³² Traders meeting regularly across seasons developed relationships of trust and reciprocity, creating networks that extended well beyond immediate neighbors.

Craft specialization further strengthened these networks of interdependence. Tiv weavers, Nupe metalworkers, Yoruba dyers, and Hausa leather artisans produced goods that were essential to other regions, creating mutual reliance.³³ A Yoruba weaver supplying cloth to Igbo and Nupe markets, or a Nupe blacksmith whose tools were used in Tiv farms, illustrates how economic interdependence bound communities together. The findings suggest that specialization was not merely an economic feature but a social one, producing obligations and mutual support that reinforced cohesion. Long-distance trade expanded this integration across regions. Hausa merchants participated in trans-Saharan trade, bringing kola nuts, leather, and grains to North Africa while importing salt, horses, and luxury items.³⁴ The movement of goods was accompanied by the spread of ideas and religious practices, particularly Islam, which provided a shared moral and intellectual framework across communities.³⁵ These exchanges fostered both material and cultural bonds, linking diverse peoples through repeated, structured interactions that reinforced unity.

Political Integration

Political institutions in pre-colonial Nigeria operated in both centralized and decentralized forms, but the findings show that both forms contributed to integration by providing frameworks for cooperation, conflict management, and legitimacy. In Oyo, the Alaafin worked with the Oyo Mesi council to maintain accountability, with vassal towns retaining a degree of autonomy while remaining tied to the imperial center.³⁶ In Northern Nigeria, the Sokoto Caliphate integrated Hausa, Fulani, and other communities under shared legal, religious, and administrative systems.³⁷ Decentralized systems, such as Igbo and Tiv societies, also facilitated integration through participatory governance. Village assemblies, councils of elders, and institutions like the Aro Oracle coordinated labor, mediated disputes, and maintained peace across multiple

³²Fadipe, 1970; Afigbo, 1981; Bohannon & Bohannon, 1969

³³Nadel, 1942; Falola & Heaton, 2008

³⁴Falola, & Heaton, 2008; Last, 1967

³⁵Falola, T. *Culture and customs of Nigeria*. Greenwood Press, 2003

³⁶Falola, 2003

³⁷Falola & Heaton, 2008; Hogendorn, 1994

settlements.³⁸These findings demonstrate that political authority, whether centralized or decentralized, was most effective when it was part of a broader network of social, economic, and cultural integration. Alliances, intermarriage, and ritual obligations extended political cohesion beyond immediate communities, creating a multi-layered fabric of stability.

Migration and mobility emerge as a major integrative force. Hausa merchants traveled extensively along trans-Saharan routes, Yoruba traders moved between forest and savannah zones, Nupe craftsmen relocated in search of patronage, and Islamic scholars carried religious knowledge across towns and emirate.³⁹The study shows that migration was not disruptive; rather, it connected communities, transmitted technology, reinforced kinship networks, and promoted shared cultural practices. Settlement patterns, including the creation of satellite communities and the movement of artisans, helped integrate local customs with those of newcomers. Religious scholars further provided a moral and intellectual glue, strengthening common norms across regions. In practical terms, a Yoruba trader establishing a settlement in a Tiv region or a Nupe craftsman working in Hausa towns contributed to a dynamic system where migration produced cooperation, reinforced economic ties, and strengthened cultural unity.

Summary and conclusion

This finding demonstrates that integration in pre-colonial Nigeria was an active, dynamic process, not a passive or accidental condition. Social institutions, economic networks, political structures, and patterns of mobility all worked together to produce cohesion across regions and ethnic groups. While prior literature established the significance of these mechanisms, this study highlights their outward-facing function how kinship, marriage, oral traditions, markets, political councils, and migration actively linked multiple communities into enduring networks of trust, obligation, and cooperation. Integration was constantly negotiated, reinforced through repeated interaction, and sustained by overlapping social, economic, and political practices. These insights provide a historically grounded understanding of how diverse societies maintained cohesion without centralized modern states and offer lessons for interpreting unity and cooperation in complex, multi-ethnic societies today.

This study shows that pre-colonial Nigerian societies achieved unity through lived practices and institutions that encouraged cooperation, mutual responsibility, and shared identity. Social networks such as kinship, marriage alliances, and age-grade associations were not just cultural traditions they actively connected communities, distributed resources, and maintained moral obligations. Markets and trade created both economic and social bonds, while festivals, oral traditions, and religious practices reinforced collective memory and a sense of belonging. Political systems, whether centralized in the Oyo Empire and northern emirates or decentralized among the Igbo and Tiv, provided structures for governance, conflict resolution, and accountability.

³⁸Afigbo, 1981; Bohannan & Bohannan, 1969)

³⁹Lovejoy, 1980; Falola & Heaton, 2008; Nadel, 1942; Last, 1967

Even in moments of rivalry or tension, communities relied on these mechanisms to restore balance, demonstrating that cohesion was continuously negotiated, sustained, and reinforced through daily life.

The significance of these findings lies in what they reveal about integration as a process rather than a fixed outcome. Unity was never about erasing difference or enforcing uniformity, it grew from the willingness of communities to work together, to respect diverse identities, and to maintain reciprocal responsibilities. For contemporary Nigeria, this suggests that national cohesion can be nurtured through deliberate investment in social and economic institutions that encourage interaction and mutual support. Policies that strengthen local governance, encourage community-based dispute resolution, promote inter-regional trade, and celebrate shared cultural practices can echo these historical lessons. In scholarship, understanding pre-colonial mechanisms of integration provides a richer framework for analysing contemporary challenges of division, marginalization, and ethnic tension.

Looking ahead, the pre-colonial experience reminds us that diversity is not an obstacle to unity but a resource that, when managed with care and foresight, can sustain cooperation and collective identity. Nigerian policymakers, civil society actors, and scholars can draw from these historical examples to foster systems that promote inclusion, respect, and collaboration. By grounding contemporary strategies in the principles that sustained cohesion in the past, Nigeria can build a more resilient and integrated society, one where communities are connected not only by law or policy but by everyday practices of trust, responsibility, and shared purpose.