

**Patterns of Migrations and Population Mobility in Sudanic West Africa:  
Evidence from ancient Kano, 800-1800 AD**

By

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**Extended Abstract**

It is a historical fact that a great deal of demographic mobility took place in distant past and African societies were not exceptions to this phenomenon. Indeed, pre-colonial Sudanic West Africa has a long history of population mobility, both regionally and internationally, and many of its communities often contained alien residents and groups. A remarkable example of such societies was ancient Kano, whose magnificent history started around 7th century AD as a settlement of immigrant animist blacksmiths. From that century onwards, the history of Kano was underlined by constant, consistent and massive population movements, within and between it and other geo-political regions, for more than one thousand years. It was particularly famous as a unique trans-Saharan commercial terminal and equally renowned as a notable Islamic learning centre. These ensured enormous social interactions within and between culturally distinct communities and quickly earned Kano a reputation as an important and formidable medieval urban metropolis (the largest in Sudanic West Africa).

This study reconstructs the historical development of ancient Kano, projecting the nature and transformative roles of migrations and population mobility in the

development of the city over time. It identifies and focuses on three basic mobility forms: emigration out of Kano (by indigenes/residents), immigration into Kano (by “foreigners”) and seasonal migration. While all these forms have often included both voluntary and forced migratory processes, the first two forms were permanent or semi-permanent patterns, the latter two forms were short-term migratory engagements. These led to socio-cultural changes and influences within Kano as well as in other geographical regions that interacted with it. The paper also engages the trends in cross-community migrations in Kano – by merchants and itinerants, settlers, invaders and scholars – and also interrogates the diversity of its varied sojourners. This paper argues that the nature of Kano’s pre-colonial segregated neighbourhoods (the *Birni* for its indigenous populations and *Waje* quarters for the settlers) emphasised the presence of alien resident groups. In terms of cross-community encounters, it was amply exhibited that ancient Kano contained large numbers of diverse settlers (such as the Wangarawa, Kanuri, Arabs, Nupe, Kwararafa, Yoruba and Fulani), invaders (the Fulani and Kwararafa), as well as scholars, itinerants and merchants (like the Tuaregs, Baidawa and Arabs from Tripoli, Tunis, Egypt and the far East).

In all, Kano’s sojourners were drawn from the limits of Senegambia in the west, over the oases of the Sahara to the borders of Egypt and Darfur in the north, and into the countries of Wadai, Bagirmi and Adamawa in the south-east and south-west frontiers. The paper also elaborates on the spread and influence of Kano’s language – Hausa – to diverse distant regions, even to the coasts of the Red Sea and northwards to Morocco, Tripoli, Tunis and Egypt, and westward up to the frontiers of Senegambia. It argues that this was a significant proof of Kano’s migrants’ influence, and the exigencies

of population mobility on such other distant geographical regions that interacted with it. The paper concludes that contrary to the claimed “immobility” of peoples before the dawn of the 19th century, ancient Kano, like elsewhere in Sudanic Africa, has a rich history of massive, constant and systematic migrations and population mobility since the 7th century AD.

The methodology for this study is a historicized method which goes back to investigate the concerns of the study. It highlights the evolution, changing trends and dynamics of this pattern of historical demography in Kano city. Basically, a qualitative framework is employed and research data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources in historical scholarship. These include archival documents and extant published and un-published literature which are related to the subject of research.