

## When the Guests Outdance the Hosts: Reverse Acculturation in Sabon Gari Kano

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2025.v13i08.005>

| Received: 27.06.2025 | Accepted: 12.08.2025 | Published: 16.08.2025

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### Abstract

### Original Research Article

This study investigates the dynamics of acculturation in Sabon Gari, Kano – a historic migrant settlement established during British colonial railway construction in 1911. Challenging conventional acculturation theories, the research reveals a paradoxical cultural assimilation pattern where the Hausa host culture has been significantly influenced by migrant communities, contrary to initial hypotheses. Through archival analysis of Bako's (2006) historical work and contemporary interviews, the study employs Unidirectional Acculturation Theory to examine this unexpected cultural reversal. Findings demonstrate that migrant cultures have dominated the area's social fabric despite Kano's status as a preeminent Hausa city, suggesting the need to reconsider traditional acculturation models in artificially created urban spaces. The paper concludes by advocating for expanded research on how such cultural enclaves influence broader metropolitan identity formation.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Sabon Gari Kano, Cultural Assimilation, Hausa Culture, Migrant Communities, Colonial Urbanism, Reverse Acculturation, Nigeria, Unidirectional Theory.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Acculturation (*Cudanyar Al'adu*) refers to the process of cultural changes that occur when a community, group of people, or an individual interacts and blends with another community that has distinct customs and traditions. Acculturation involves the exchange of cultural traits, adaptation, and sometimes the merging of practices, leading to a transformed cultural identity. This can happen through migration, trade, colonization, or prolonged contact between different cultural groups.

This study is based on an analysis of the acculturation process that has occurred (and continues to occur) in Sabon Gari, Kano. Sabon Gari Kano is a district in Kano city, Northern Nigeria. The area is home to diverse migrant communities. Among these migrants are Nigerian ethnic groups such as the Yoruba and Igbo, while others are foreign nationals from countries like India, China, Cameroon, and others. This research is based on a book by Ba'ko (2006) [1]. The book is

analyzed as it provides comprehensive details on the founding history of Sabon Gari Kano and the social dynamics of the area. The study reviewed the book in relation to the establishment of Sabon Gari Kano, its resident communities, and their economic activities. This serves as a foundation for further research. The study focuses on the types of socio-cultural changes observed, with particular attention to the current state of affairs in the area.

The primary objective of this research is to study acculturation in Sabon Gari, Kano. Specifically, the paper focuses on:

- Tracing historically the establishment of Sabon Gari Kano during the colonial era, and
- Analyzing the current state of acculturation in Sabon Gari and its environments.

A key hypothesis in this study is that Hausa culture has dominated the cultures of other immigrant groups in Sabon Gari, Kano. This hypothesis is based on

<sup>1</sup> Sabon Gari Kano: History of Immigrants and Inter-Group Relations in the 21st Century

the Unidirectional Theory (*Ra'in Nashe Al'adu*). Given that the area is located in Hausaland and is surrounded by Hausa people, it is expected that Hausa customs will overshadow those of other groups.

### 1.3 Research Theory

This study is anchored on the Unidirectional Acculturation Theory. The Hausa translation of this theory is not yet standardized, so the provisional term "*Ra'in Nashe Al'adu*" (Theory of Cultural Domination) is adopted for this research. The translation reflects the theory's premise: when two cultures interact, one will inevitably dominate the other.

Ngo (2008 p. 5-8) discusses this theory but highlights its limitations in research applications. Park (1950 p. 138) explains that the roots of this theory emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Robert Park studied how societies experience acculturation. Gordon (1978) argues that minority cultures tend to assimilate into the dominant culture of a given region. This theory suggests that immigrants will not fully integrate or benefit from their host society's resources until they adopt the host culture (Mullaly, 2002) [2].

The Unidirectional Acculturation Theory provides a crucial analytical framework for this study of Sabon Gari Kano, as it helps illuminate the unexpected power dynamics between Hausa hosts and migrant communities. While the theory traditionally predicts the dominance of host cultures over migrant groups, our study on Sabon Gari reveals a more complex reality where the anticipated unidirectional influence has been significantly altered by colonial urban planning and economic factors. This theoretical lens proves particularly valuable highlights on how spatial segregation and institutional arrangements were established during British colonial rule and created policies that enabled migrant cultures to be maintained and even extend their influence, challenging conventional assumptions about cultural assimilation. By applying this theory to Sabon Gari's unique context, we can better understand how urban settlements can disrupt traditional acculturation patterns and produce alternative cultural hierarchies.

## 1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is a translated and slightly adapted version of a study originally published in Hausa. Key cultural terms have been retained with explanations for English readers (See, Sani & Maikwari, 2019). The study employed two major research strategies. First, a literature review was conducted, with particular focus on Bako's (2006) book, *Sabon Gari Kano*. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with community members,

providing insights into the current realities of Sabon Gari Kano.

Notably, the researchers did not conduct physical fieldwork, which imposed certain limitations on the study. However, to compensate, interviews included current residents of Sabon Gari Kano, facilitated through modern communication platforms. Additionally, discussions were held with external experts familiar with the area to broaden perspectives.

## 2.0 A Concise Review of Ahmed Bako's Sabon Gari Kano

Ahmed Bako's *Sabon Gari Kano* provides an exhaustive account of the history of this area, particularly from its establishment to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this reason, we will briefly review this book to highlight key aspects about the area. Our focus will be on the history of the area's creation and its development.

Sabon Gari is a district in the city of Kano, Nigeria, known for its diverse population. Historically, Sabon Gari (which means "New Town" in Hausa) was established as a settlement for non-native Nigerians and foreign migrants, including Lebanese, Indians, and Europeans, during the British colonial era in Nigeria. Over time, it became a melting pot of different ethnicities and a commercial hub, which culturally and religiously contributed to Kano's cosmopolitan character/development.

### 2.1 The Creation of Sabon Gari Kano

After the British colonial masters established their rule, their gaze fell squarely on Nigeria's wealth. Their primary objective was to control the country's economic resources (Mahadi, 1998 p. 14). Hogendorn (1978 p. 46) explained that this objective was the main reason they vigorously pursued the expansion of cotton farming in some parts of Hausaland, including Kano. In their efforts to achieve this exploitative goal, the British government realized that cotton production would not improve without establishing a railway line to Kano city for easy transportation to the coast in Lagos.

The railway reached Kano in 1911 and began operations in 1912 (Shenton, 1986 p. 74). From this time, direct export of cotton and other cash crops from Kano city became possible. The establishment of the railway line attracted waves of migrant communities to Kano, including Nigerians from the south and foreigners from places like Gold Coast (Ghana), Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Togo, and others (Mahdi, 1982 p. 125). The British colonial administration welcomed these migrants as they needed workers to manage railway operations and perform other menial jobs like clerical work.

<sup>2</sup> Here, "host" refers to the indigenous people of a given location, and their culture is termed the host culture.

Among the major problems that emerged at that time was finding accommodation for these migrants. The situation arose because there was a law stating that migrants must reside under the colonial government's jurisdiction, not under traditional rulers (Frishman, 1977 p. 97). Before the establishment of colonial rule in *Kasar Hausa*, traditional rulers allowed migrants to settle under their authority. They were even given the freedom to practice trades and live like other members of the community.

Sabon Gari was one of the settlements created for migrants. (Other settlements established before this included Kano Township and Lebanese Quarter (Edley, 1976 p. 56). Sabon Gari Kano was established in 1913. Until 1914, no one could reside in this area without a permit. By 1920, the area became open to anyone wishing to live there. This occurred after Frederick John Lugard's [3], departure. This also created opportunities for indigenous Kano residents to acquire plots of land and houses in the new settlement. Initially, this area was created exclusively for migrants (Urguhart, 1999 p. 47). The British administration provided urban development policies that attracted more residents to the area. This is evident in Bako's submission on Sabon Gari Kano:

During the years from 1920 and 1945, more migrants inhabited the settlement. The colonial government auctioned off land to these migrants for both commercial and residential purposes. Land was also endowed to religious organizations and social clubs all according to master plan conceived by the colonial authority. (Bako, 2006 p. 36)

There is clear evidence of British influence on the area's economy. Beyond this, one can speculate that they aimed to impose their policies, philosophies, and way of life on colonized communities. Meek (1971 p. 176) reports that the British colonial government created a system called "permit to reside." This was an attempt to prevent host communities (Hausa people) from living in Sabon Gari, Kano.

This law or system did not have immediate visible effects on the Kano metropole. Thus, after some time, the urbanisation of Kano extended through host communities (Hausa people) toward the area. By moving from Kano city to Sabon Gari, they removed themselves from the Sarkin Kano's jurisdiction and came under British colonial administration. It should be remembered that the Kano Emirate at this time operated under Islamic law. There were laws prohibiting alcohol, prostitution, and other things forbidden in Islam. The opposite was true in Sabon Gari. Therefore, this paper argues that

claims about Hausa people returning to Sabon Gari solely for business reasons are mere tales. There's more to it! The increasing migration to Sabon Gari by Kano natives prompted the then Sarkin Kano, Abdullahi Bayero, to alert the authorities, stating:

Now the Hausa man leaves the city and goes to live amongst them (i.e. strangers in Sabon Gari), can be say that he (i.e. the Hausa man) had removed himself from the authority of the Sarkin Kano and had entered the Sabon Gari under the Station Magistrate. (Edley, 1976 p. 214)

The question here is: what was the real reason for Kano city natives migrating to Sabon Gari? This question requires deeper investigation. This paper has found something in Governor Clifford's remarks where he suggested Sabon Gari should come under Kano city's administration. In his writings, he described Kano's leadership as a "Muhammadan Emirate" (Bako, 2006 p. 79). Regardless, it's clear that Islam was practiced in Kano at that time. In Sabon Gari, the situation was quite the opposite.

## 2.2 Economy and Education

The Sabon Gari market was established in 1918. It was designed to operate according to the cultural norms of migrant communities (excluding the Hausa and Fulani residents of Kano) (Hay & Smith, 1970 p. 109). However, this plan failed. People from various areas, especially Hausa from Kano city, flocked to this market. To this day, it remains among the largest market in Kano city, attracting traders from diverse regions.

Regarding education in Sabon Gari, private schools dominate the area. Churches, individuals, and various organizations established private institutions within Sabo Gari. Bako observes:

It needs emphasis at this point that; up to the present date, the various governments in Kano State seem not to have given much concern to the educational development of Sabon Gari Communities. This explains the reasons for the efforts by voluntary agencies. (Bako, 2006: 112)

To date, most schools in the area are not government-run. They are owned by religious groups (particularly Christian and Muslim organizations) and private individuals. The table below lists some of the schools in Sabon Gari, Kano, that existed in 1970 (marking the early expansion and prevalence of schools in this area).

<sup>3</sup> To learn more about Frederick John Lugard and his role in colonialism, see Apata (1990), Wuam and Jatau (2015), and Bello (2017).

**Table 1: Some 1970s' Schools in Sabon Gari, Kano**

	School Name	Year Established	Owner
1.	Holy Trinity	1925	C.M.S. Anglican Church
2.	UNA	1929	African Church
3.	Baptist	1929	Baptist Mission
4.	St. Thomas	1930	Roman Catholic Mission
5.	S.I.M	1945	SIM/ECWA Church
6.	Ansar-ud-deed	1945	Ansar-ud-deen Society
7.	Igbo Union School	1945	The Igbo State Union
8.	Methodist	1947	Methodist Church
9.	Ahmadiyya Secondary School	1970	Ahmadiyya Mission

Adopted from Bako (2006 p. 113) [4].

### 3.0 Sabon Gari Kano Today: A Microcosm of Nigeria's Urban Transformation

Sabon Gari Kano has evolved into a vibrant urban enclave that serves as both a historical artifact of British colonial urban planning and a living laboratory of Nigeria's contemporary multicultural dynamics. This district, originally conceived as a segregated settlement for non-native populations during British colonial rule, has transformed into one of Kano's most socio-economically dynamic and culturally diverse neighborhoods. The area's current character reflects multiple layers of historical influences - from its colonial foundations to post-independence migrations and contemporary globalization trends. What makes Sabon Gari particularly fascinating is how it maintains its distinct identity while being physically adjacent to Kano's traditional city center, creating a striking juxtaposition of architectural styles, social norms, and economic activities.

### 3.1 Social Life: The Anatomy of an Urban Melting Pot

The social ecosystem of Sabon Gari Kano presents a fascinating case study in urban sociology, functioning as Nigeria's version of a "melting pot" where diverse ethnic and religious communities interact daily. Unlike the more homogeneous social fabric of traditional Hausa neighborhoods, Sabon Gari thrives on its diversity, with social interactions governed more by commercial pragmatism than ethnic or religious affiliations. The area's social calendar reflects this hybridity, blending traditional Nigerian celebrations with adopted Western practices. Young professionals from across Nigeria are increasingly drawn to Sabon Gari's relatively liberal social environment, where they can socialize across gender lines with fewer restrictions than in other parts of the predominantly Muslim city. However, this social landscape is not without its tensions, as conservative elements occasionally clash with the area's more cosmopolitan residents over issues like alcohol consumption and mixed-gender socializing.

The neighborhood's nightlife has become legendary, with bars, clubs, and informal drinking spots operating alongside more traditional tea houses and suya spots, creating a 24-hour economic advantage that stands in stark contrast to the diurnal rhythm of the surrounding Hausa neighborhoods.

### 3.2 Architecture

As soon as one enters the Sabon Gari area of Kano, it is immediately clear that they are in a place with architectural designs that are distinct from those of the Hausa people (traditional settlement of the city). Abdullahi (2019, June 5) [5], stated: "The most common buildings in Sabon Gari Kano are rental houses and hotels. Once someone enters the area, they realize it is a hub of constant movement and activity." The remaining individual houses in the area are of modern architectural style and design. There is nothing about them that relates to traditional Hausa design or structure. Without a doubt, this is what Sidi (2019, June 5) [6], considered when he said: "Sabon Gari Kano is merely a settlement of diverse people for living and commercial purposes."

### 3.3 Dress

Clothing in Sabon Gari Kano serves as a visible marker of the neighborhood's unique cultural position, where dress codes become a daily negotiation between tradition and modernity, local and global influences. The prevalence of Western-style clothing (trousers, shirts, and dresses) among both men and women distinguishes Sabon Gari's streets from the flowing robes and hijabs that dominate other parts of Kano. This sartorial landscape reflects several intersecting factors:

- Demographic Composition:** The area's large population of southern Nigerian and international migrants brings different sartorial traditions that influence local norms.
- Commercial Imperatives:** Many residents work in businesses requiring "corporate" or Western-style dress, particularly in the

<sup>4</sup> These data were verified through interviews and online searches to ensure their accuracy and relevance.

<sup>5</sup> Abdullahi. (2019, June 5). [Personal interview].

<sup>6</sup> Sidi. (2019, June 5). [Personal interview].

hospitality and retail sectors that dominate the local economy.

- c. **Social Signaling:** Younger residents often use clothing to express their cosmopolitan identities and distinguish themselves from more conservative elements in the wider city.

However, as Umar's (2019) [7], experience demonstrates, these sartorial norms can create tensions with security forces accustomed to more traditional attire. His account of being stopped while wearing Hausa dress reveals how clothing becomes politicized in this transitional urban space, where appearances are constantly scrutinized and interpreted through multiple cultural lenses. The area's nightlife introduces another layer of sartorial complexity, with club-goers adopting global youth fashion trends that push against Kano's generally conservative norms, creating a dynamic where dress becomes both personal expression and social provocation.

### 3.4 Cultural Practices

Sabon Gari Kano's cultural landscape represents a fascinating case of cultural syncretism, where traditional Nigerian, Western, and global youth cultures intersect and reinterpret each other. The area has become ground zero for new cultural forms that blend these influences in ways both innovative and controversial. Several key socio-cultural phenomena characterize the area as:

- a. **Nightlife and Entertainment:** The proliferation of bars, clubs, and event spaces has made Sabon Gari the epicenter of Kano's nightlife, attracting young people from across the city and beyond. These venues host everything from traditional Nigerian music performances to Western-style DJ nights, creating a cultural hybridity that's unique in northern Nigeria.
- b. **Life Cycle Celebrations:** The area has become the preferred location for "modern" celebrations like bachelor parties, graduation parties, and birthday bashes that incorporate both Nigerian and Western elements. Hotels and event centers have adapted to this demand by offering packages that blend traditional hospitality with contemporary entertainment options.
- c. **Religious Coexistence:** Despite its reputation for liberal social norms, Sabon Gari also demonstrates remarkable interfaith harmony, with churches and mosques often located in close proximity, and residents participating in each other's religious festivals to a degree uncommon elsewhere in Kano.
- d. **Gender Dynamics:** The area offers women, particularly those from more conservative backgrounds, opportunities for social and

economic participation that would be difficult elsewhere in northern Nigeria, though within negotiated boundaries.

As Abdullahi (2019) noted, the area's alcohol culture represents both a draw for some and a point of contention for others, encapsulating the broader tensions between liberal and conservative worldviews that play out daily in Sabon Gari's streets. The commercial sex workers that thrive in the area's hotels, while officially condemned, are tacitly tolerated as part of the neighborhood's complex social ecosystem, reflecting the pragmatic compromises that characterize urban life in this unique space. These cultural practices collectively create an environment where identities are constantly performed, negotiated, and reinvented, making Sabon Gari one of Nigeria's most fascinating sites of cultural production and transformation.

## 4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Contrary to the study's initial hypothesis based on the Unidirectional Acculturation Theory (*Ra'in Nashe Al'adu*), which predicted Hausa cultural dominance over migrant communities in Sabon Gari Kano, the findings reveal a complete reversal of this dynamic. Rather than Hausa traditions assimilating migrant cultures, the opposite has occurred. Migrant cultures have overwhelmingly influenced and, in many aspects, replaced indigenous Hausa cultural practices. This unexpected outcome emerged clearly across multiple dimensions of daily life in Sabon Gari, Kano.

Key Factors Explaining This Cultural Reversal:

### 1. Foundational History

Bako (2006) establishes that the Hausa people did not establish Sabon Gari Kano. Philosophically, the settlement represents an enclave fundamentally distinct from Hausa society, despite its geographical location in Hausaland. From this perspective, Hausa residents who later moved to Sabon Gari arrived as "migrants" themselves, making them subject to cultural assimilation according to the very theory we examined.

### 2. Delayed Hausa Settlement

The British colonial administration initially barred Hausa residents from Sabon Gari for years, allowing migrant communities to establish strong cultural roots first. By the time Hausa people gained access, the area had already developed a mature, non-Hausa cultural ecosystem resistant to external influence.

### 3. Christian Missionary Influence

The proliferation of churches and missionary schools (9 institutions by 1970) created alternative cultural and educational systems that actively countered Hausa/Islamic traditions. These institutions became powerful acculturation agents, shaping generations of

<sup>7</sup> Umar. (2019, May 18). [Personal interview].

residents with values distinct from surrounding Hausa communities.

#### 4. Colonial Urban Planning

British authorities deliberately designed Sabon Gari as a cultural counterweight to traditional Hausa society. Their policies systematically privileged migrant communities and Western cultural norms, intentionally weakening potential Hausa influence.

#### 5. Competitive Multiculturalism

The concentration of diverse ethnic groups (Yoruba, Igbo, Indians, Chinese, etc.) created an environment of cultural negotiation where no single group could dominate, ironically leading all to adopt more Westernized norms as a neutral common ground.

#### The British Cultural Imprint

Surprisingly, the dominant cultural framework in Sabon Gari doesn't derive from any particular Nigerian ethnic group, but rather directly mimics British colonial culture in several key aspects:

**Table 2: British Colonial Cultural Influence in Sabon Gari**

Cultural Domain	British Influence
Dress	Western clothing norms prevail over traditional attire.
Architecture	European-style buildings dominate the urban landscape.
Social Activities	Nightclubs, dance halls, and bachelor parties replace traditional gatherings.
Lifestyle	Individualistic "every man for himself" ethos contrasts with communal Hausa values

This cultural paradigm persists decades after independence, demonstrating how effectively colonial urban planning created self-sustaining alternative social systems within African cities. The findings suggest that acculturation theories must account for scenarios where colonial powers deliberately engineered cultural environments that privilege foreign norms over indigenous traditions.

The study observed that Sabon Gari Kano represents a unique case of *inverted acculturation*, where:

1. The expected "host" culture (Hausa) became the marginalized group
2. Migrant communities collectively adopted colonial culture rather than indigenous norms
3. The patterns became institutionalized through urban planning and education systems

#### 4.1 CONCLUSION

The Hausa proverb "*Ba kullum ake kwana a gado ba!*" (Every day is not Sunday) perfectly summarizes Sabon Gari Kano's unexpected cultural course. This study reveals a striking paradox: in the heart of Hausaland, migrant cultures have not just coexisted but fundamentally transformed the area's social fabric, reversing the predicted acculturation pattern. The findings dismantle the assumption that indigenous cultures automatically dominate migrant communities, demonstrating instead how colonial urban planning, economic forces, and institutional power can create alternative cultural ecosystems.

Three profound insights emerge from this research: First, cultural influence flows along channels of power and access rather than simple demographic majority. Second, urban spaces function as cultural battlegrounds where colonial legacies continue shaping postcolonial realities. Third, the very concept of "host

culture" becomes problematic in artificially created settlements like Sabon Gari.

These conclusions demand a rethinking of acculturation theories to account for: the lasting impact of colonial urban design, how minority cultures can achieve dominance through institutional networks, and why some urban spaces resist indigenous cultural absorption. Future research should trace how Sabon Gari's cultural model influences broader Hausa society and examine comparable urban enclaves across Africa.

#### Acknowledgment

This is an English translation of an article originally published in Hausa as: *Cudanyar Al'adu a Sabon Garin Kano: Wani Misali Na "Mun Zo Garinku Mun Fi Ku Rawa."* EAS Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies, 2019.

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