

Study of the Cultural Impact of Communal Living by the Indigenous Settlers in Rural Communities within Abuja City

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(Received: 16 January 2025, Accepted: 21 January 2025)

(2nd International Conference on Modern and Advanced Research ICMAR 2025, January 15-16, 2025)

ATIF/REFERENCE: Anselm, A. J., Nnaemeka, O., Ibrahim, S., Sambo, K., abubakar, A., Chikeize, O., Umar, A., Muhammad, b. & Bello, M. (2025). Study of the Cultural Impact of Communal Living by the Indigenous Settlers in Rural Communities within Abuja City. *International Journal of Advanced Natural Sciences and Engineering Researches*, 9(1), 129-137.

Abstract – This paper looks at the cultural significance and impacts of community living within a select group of the indigenous settlers in the capital city of Abuja, Nigeria. The study identified the Gbágyi people as the major settlers amongst other minor settlers within the region. It identified the major challenges imprinted by modern development and urbanisation amongst other issues like economic marginalisation on the erosion of cultural practices and norms of the people. Through the review of the lifestyles and communal interactions of this indigenous people, the study identified the rich values the culture of the people imprints into the general communities within the region such as their social structure, leadership, festivals, beliefs, customary practices, communal livelihood, economic structure vocation, arts and craftsmanship. The significance of this is to understand the role of cultural practices in epitomizing the relevance of communal lifestyle in heritage conservations.

Keywords – Cultural Impact, Abuja City, Indigenous Settlers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rural communities are communities that reside outside urban centers. They are mostly characterized by small population size, low population density and lower standards and number of amenities. Rural areas possess distinctive economic and social dynamics owing to their connection with land based industry like agriculture and resource extraction [1]. In Nigeria, rural areas comprise mostly of low population density with small settlements, with major activities economic activities centered on agriculture and mining. The economics in rural settlements are often vulnerable to extreme weather conditions, disasters due to lack attention to infrastructural development and social vices due to traditional practices [2]. These dynamics alongside other opposing economic forces that encourage urbanization influence the significant demographic declines in rural areas otherwise known as the rural flight, where such economic incentives, infrastructural development and education standards encourage younger populations to leave the rural areas for the cities in search of education and access to better lives, thereby leaving the older, less

educated and poorer population to remain back in the rural areas [3,4]. Likewise the sluggish economic development results in poorer services like education, healthcare, and advanced infrastructure.

Despite these imperfections, the dwellers of rural settlements often find ways of coexisting and maintaining active status that sustains their upkeep. This paper looks at the case of the indigenous settlers of the area now occupied by the capital city of Abuja in Nigeria. Through the drive for urbanization and development of the main Abuja city, these communities have been driven into forming simpler rural communities within the enclaves of the larger Abuja city.

II. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria, is characterized by a unique blend of urbanization and rural settlements, particularly in its Federal Capital Territory (FCT) region. While the central city area has become a bustling urban hub with modern infrastructure and cosmopolitan influences, the surrounding rural settlements continue to preserve traditional ways of life, with communal living and social interaction forming the cornerstone of their social fabric. In these rural communities, people live in close-knit environments where social ties are strengthened through shared responsibilities, intergenerational relationships, and collective economic activities, such as agriculture and trade. The traditional values of cooperation, respect for elders, and communal support are still highly emphasized. However, as Abuja continues to expand, rural communities are facing increasing pressure from urbanization, migration, and the influx of modern ideologies. These changes present both opportunities and challenges for the sustainability of communal living practices. This study seeks to explore the cultural impact of communal living and social interactions in these rural settlements, examining how these communities navigate the tension between preserving cultural traditions and adapting to the forces of modernization. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing the social, economic, and cultural transformations occurring in Abuja's rural peripheries, as well as for informing policies that promote inclusive development and cultural preservation.

A. *Study Location :*

Abuja is the capital city of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, strategically situated at the geographic midpoint of the country within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). As the seat of the Federal Government of Nigeria, it hosts key national institutions, landmarks, and buildings spread across the over 50 districts. Study identified the indigenous inhabitants of Abuja comprise of:

- Abawa,
- Basa,
- Gwandara
- Gbagyi
- Gade,
- Dibo,
- Egburra,
- Nupe and
- Koro

Of these 9 groups of indigenous settlers, the Gbagyi/Gbari communities have the majority of the population in the region. They are mostly found in AMAC (Abuja Municipal Area Council) and Bwari Area Council (fig. 1). Some of their villages/settlements are Wuse, Asokoro now relocated to Sabon Wuse, Aso in Niger and other neighbouring states. Others are Karshi, Kurudu, Nyanya, Idu, Gwagwa, Jiwa, Sheretti, Karmo, Takunshara, Burum, Dutse Alhaji, Zuba, Kuje, Kwoi, Karon-Magaji, Ija, Kanwu, Sherre. Fig. 2 shows the aerial images of the major location of the settlers as captured in current Abuja city scape.

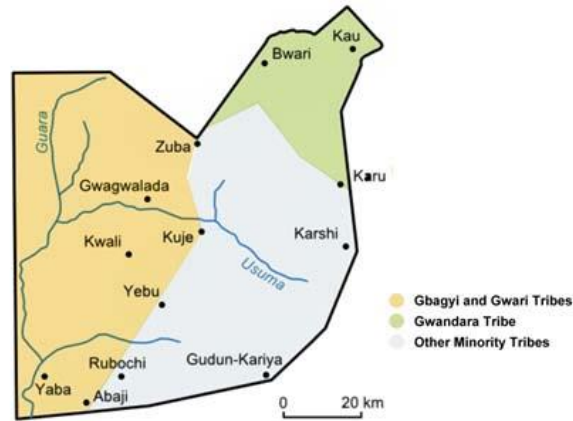


Fig. 1 Map of Abuja showing the significant locations of the major indigenous settlers

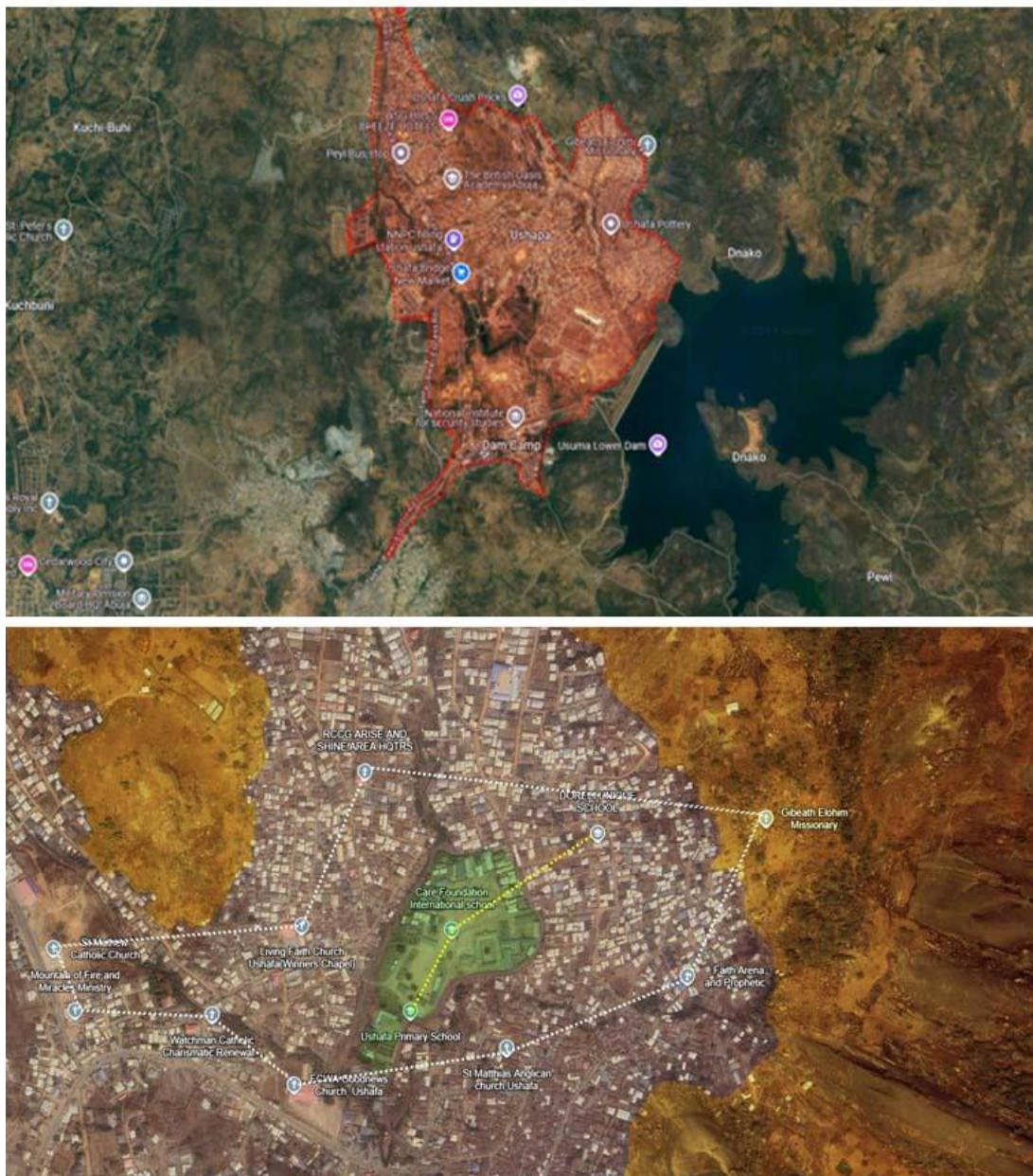


Fig. 2 Aerial view of the Ushafa settlement occupied by the Gbagyi people

This study focuses on the major settlements, which houses the Gbagyi/Gbari and their impacts on the general Abuja region. These rural communities offer a distinct perspective for examining traditional communal living setups and their influence on social interactions. The communities are generally

structured around conventional compound designs, with several households positioned around a central courtyard [5]. This spatial arrangement encourages frequent social interactions among extended family members and supports shared activities like communal cooking, childcare, and joint decision-making. Moreover, the significant characteristics of the communal areas such as village squares, local markets, and community halls act as key venues for ceremonies, public debates, and social events, enhancing the feeling of shared identity and community unity as shown in fig. 3 [6]. This study focuses on the study of the communal lifestyles and activities of these indigenous settlers and how these have been influenced by the general modern structure of the entire Abuja city region. Selecting these rural settlers of Abuja as the study location is important because these communities represent traditional Nigerian communal ways of living that are becoming increasingly scarce in urban areas. Grasping how communal living influences cultural continuity, economic collaboration, and social unity in this scenario can offer important insights for sustainable community growth and urban planning in the wider Abuja area.

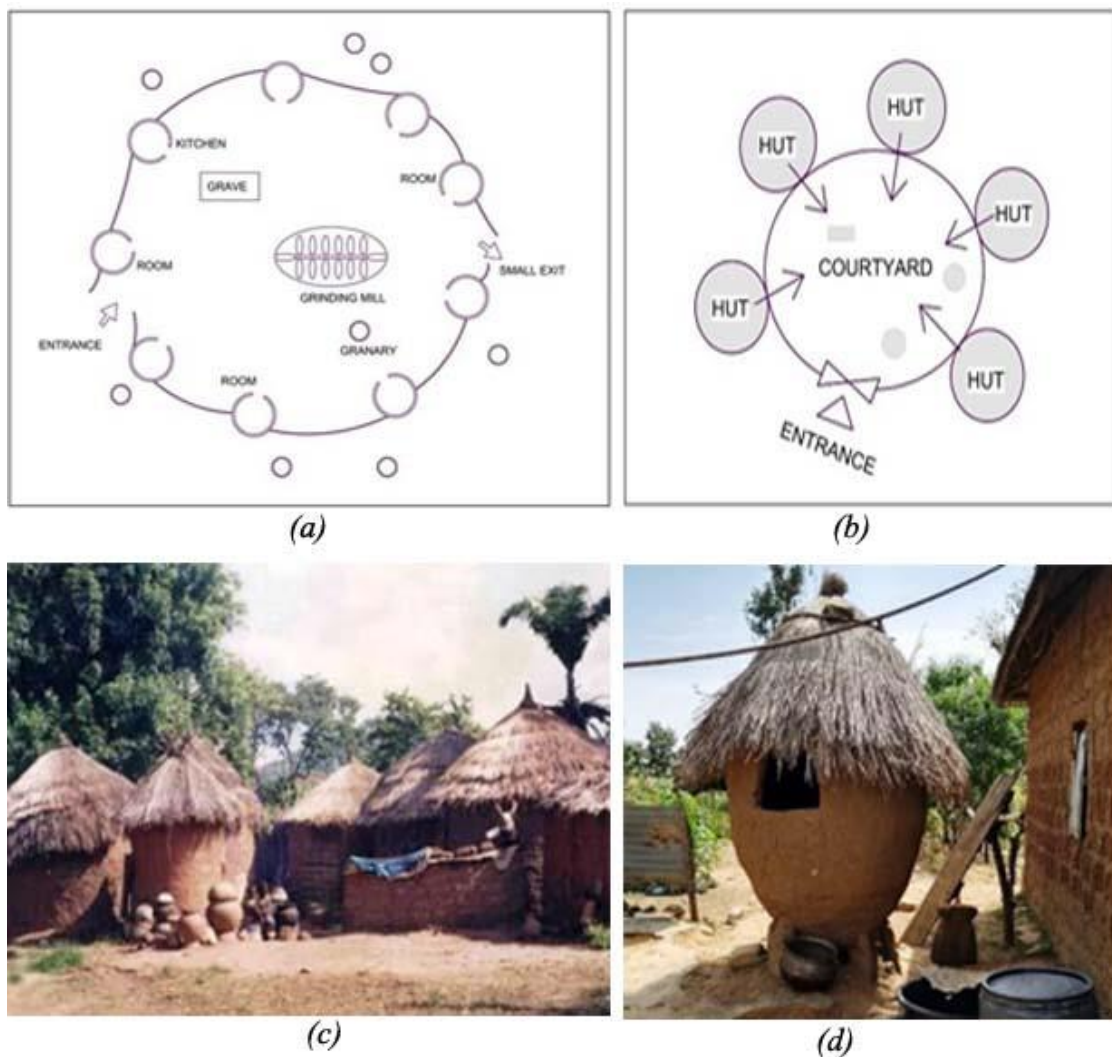


Fig. 3 Images showcasing the communal living character of the people, (a) illustration of typical pre-colonial housing, (b) illustration of pre-colonial compound, (c) image of a typical pre-colonial Gbagyi compound, (d) image of the typical traditional silo/granary, a symbolic component of Gbagyi livelihood (source; research survey [5])

B. Historical and Social Background of the major settlers:

Study identified that the Gbagyi/Gbari dialect predated from the Chadic people who settled within them over a period of a 1000 years [7]. More so, corresponding record by Hugh Clapperton suggests that the people originated from Zamfara area in northern Nigeria in 1810. This record succeeded in offering the Gbagyi people a historical date of origin with clearer expression of their distinct identity [8]. Additionally, the Gbagyi/Gbari people speak of their origins through their mythology and proverbs. A

typical storyline is that the Gbagyi/Gbariayni kingdom was a product of the *Shekwoyi/Swashe* mix, which is foremost in the part of the 7 worlds that were created by almighty *Shekwoyi'skala* (deity/power). It is believed that during the formation of the *ayni* (world), the duo of *akni* (earth) and the *oshe* (heavens) were united. Further revelations suggest that amongst other things created in the *ayni* includes the animals and landscapes followed by the *oza/zagonchi* (people). They believed that the Gbagyi/Gbari tribes were apportioned the responsibility of taking care of the *ayni* (universe) that harbours them [9].

Also related with the Gbagyi/Gbari people's origin are the distinctive cultural facets of activities like farming and hunting, which was most significant in their migration stories. Records identified the Gbagyi/Gbari people as regularly on hunting expeditions as well as involvement in search of arable lands that are secure and spacious [10]. With their livelihood dependent largely on sustained engagement in hunting and farming it became imperative for this sustained vocation to become their means of survival within the hill-country, which thence served as significant protection against wild animals and the persistence of enemies such as the Fulani and Hausa slave invaders. The presence of these hills which formed a major feature in worship of *ashan* (god) in their community invariable transformed into a discernible connection with their ancestors. With this outcome, the hill-country not only functioned as a source of protection, but also provided religious significance [11].

Another vital component of the people's history is the component of social identity. This is evident in the roles played by the shared interests by groups, which infuses the notions of individualism within group settings [12,13]. The Gbagyi/Gbari concept of betrothal farming termed '*yeyi fa*' which is an individualist concept and interest, can only be realized via a corporate identity structure. By this activity of an individual's participation in social functions like age-group farming, a known suitor can actualize the obligation of working an in-law's farm for about three times in a year with the companionship of the social group he belongs to. This action offers him self-recognition in the presence of his in-laws, as well as stronger ties with his social group. This element of self-identity can also be observed in the use of social classes such as the *agbagyiza* which simply means "a proper Gbagyi/Gbari person" and also the categorization known as *akniyida*, which means "original owners of the land". These classifications are frequently used among the Gbagyi/Gbari communities in the new Abuja as means of differentiating themselves from other groups by means of social identity [9]. Study likewise identified these behaviours like the categorization of self, social identification and social comparison with others as three major essential identity markers in inter-group relations. Though this is often seen or met with disapproval, however it justifies the action by which people are classified into either "them or us" symphony when in groups, simply based upon the social categorization element, which puts one as either in-the-group or out-of-the-group owing strictly to social identity factors steered primarily by the views that begets discrimination [14,15]. These discriminatory characteristics often matted to the indigenous settlers are familiar reactions that are observed from occupants towards the major settlers of Abuja region as well.

III. STUDY METHOD

To analyze the influence and impact of communal living in major indigenous rural settlements in Abuja, a mixed-methods research approach would be ideal. The study employed surveys of the regions as well as analysis of their lifestyles and activities. It also selected specific settlements for detailed case analysis of current events and lifestyle components. Review of findings across the major tribes/settlements was also adopted in order to identify commonalities and differences. This review helps in understanding the broader influence and variations of communal living practices.

IV. REVIEW OF COMMUNAL ACTIVITIES THAT IMPACT ON THE CULTURAL OF THE INDIGENOUS SETTLERS

The major features identified within the communities of the main indigenous settlers range from daily lifestyle activities to festivals. Most of the cultural impacts of the main settlers (the Gbagyi) are recognized during celebratory activities like festivals and social occasions. These major components of

the people's daily lifestyle that impact on the general culture and attitudes within the Abuja region are listed as:

- Social structure and Leadership
- Festivals and rites
- Beliefs and practices
- Communal livelihood and economic structure
- Vocation, arts and craftsmanship

A. Social structure and leadership through communal and clan activities

Customarily, the Gbágyì community is organised into the clan system. Each clan is headed by a structure of chieftaincy organization. This chieftaincy structure is greatly esteemed, as the value of the chiefs play central roles in the maintenance of cultural practices, law and order. A significant ideal of the Gbágyì governance system is the democratic process of decision making and ruling which is all contained within the clan system. These processes are often realized through the convening of council sessions where the seating elders and significant community and social influencers decide important matters through voicing of their opinions. Fig. 4 shows the structure of leadership in the clan system.

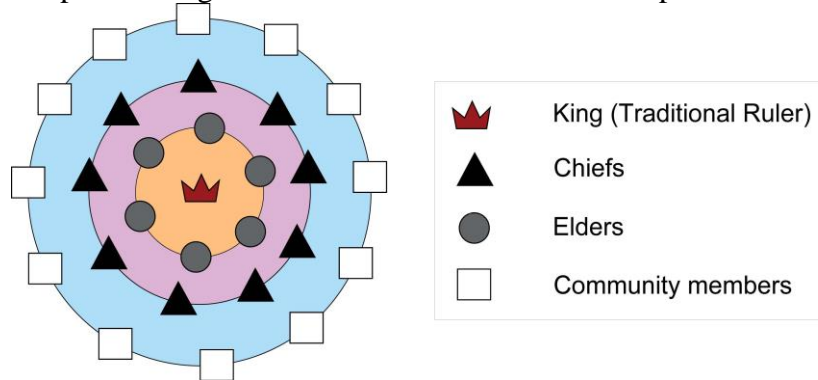


Fig. 4 Illustration of the composition of the Gbágyì democratic governance structure

B. Festivals and rites

Modern lifestyles of any peoples are driven by tendencies for evolving ceremonial such as folklore, art, crafts and rituals as means of putting forward and communicating the culture of the people [16]. The Gbágyì people observe several traditional festivals and rites as means of cultural sustenance, conservation of customs as well as communal bonding. Festivals range from observation of religious rites, heritage celebrations, family and institutional ceremonies etc. Foremost in the line-up of and ceremonies celebrated annually by the Gbágyì people to celebrate culture, history and their leadership institution is the 'Gbágyì Day'. The events featured during this time include their local music, folklore and traditional performances including dances, arts and traditional cuisines. Fig. 5 shows clips of several events demonstrating the cultural settings and communal lifestyles of the Gbágyì tribe.



Fig. 5 Pictures showing the events showcased during the Gbagyi cultural day, (a) traditional male masquerade dance, (b) traditional female age-grade and livelihood dance, (c) cultural display of hunting skills demonstrated by sporadic gunshots and incantations to gods and spirits.

C. Beliefs and practices

In modern times, the Gbágyi community possess a diverse religious assembly, with the likes of traditional religion coexisting alongside imported religions like Christianity and Islam. However, the historic undertone of the Gbágyi religion showcases an animistic practice, where numerous spiritual beings are responsible for human affairs and interests [17]. They strongly believe in ancestral spirits culminating in the worship of deities often linked to natural elements surrounding their landscapes like mountains, forests and rivers. In modern times, these belief systems are attributed not just to ritualistic practice, but as reflection of deeper reverence to nature and the general human environment. Other significant beliefs in Gbagyi culture, includes the realization that the head is the human body's most sacred part and thus dignified and honoured. Since the head is seen as the seat of wisdom, and individual identity, the culture thus prohibits women from carrying loads on the head. This shows the significance of respect and value the Gbagyi attribute to their women as means of elevating the female status and preservation of dignity.

Other major cultural practice attributed to the Gbagyi belief system is Marriage. This is considered a sacred institution amongst the people as it reflects the values and beliefs of the community. In the Gbagyi culture, marriage embodies strong cultural heritage that is rife with customs instituted to guide the couple's journey from the point of courtship and throughout matrimony. As observed in the practices, the payment of dowry in the Gbagyi culture extents to a period of seven years. During this time, the groom is expected serve the bride's parents and must accomplish a substantial amount of farm-work. This task symbolises the groom's ability to provide for his future wife and family.

D. General communal livelihood and economic structure

For the establishment of responsibility and social order, the Gbagyi culture and custom assumes the practice of division of labour within their society. In this sense, the men and women have distinctive roles as well as responsibilities within the community. While the men partake in the more physically demanding tasks like farming, hunting, crafts and industry, the women are by social classification assigned domestic duties like household management, food preparation and childcare. Within this classification, women activities by extension stretches to performing activities like farming and trade as significant economic activity. It is believed that the gender role classification reflects a patriarchal nature attributable to the Gbagyi society, which has added in shaping the capabilities and opportunities offered to women within the community [18, 19].

E. Vocation, arts and craftsmanship

The Gbágyi culture possesses a significant lushness in arts, demonstrated mainly in their weaving crafts, pottery and beadworks. Their pottery which is well-known for its elaborate designs, serves both the functions of decoration as well as durability role in preservation of agricultural produces etc. The Gbágyi textiles are renowned for its vibrant colours and patterns, which serve unique purposes in their traditional

attire as components of ceremonial costumes. Fig. 6 shows the images of the varieties of clothing and fashion patterns of the Gbagyi people ranging from common to ceremonial attires [20].



Fig. 6 Pictures showcasing the rich traditional costumes of the Gbagyi culture, (a) common household attire, (b) ceremonial attire for couples, (c) a typical Gbagyi maiden's ceremonial attire. Source: Pintrest [20]

V. CONCLUSION

This study presented the cultural significance and impacts of community living made by the indigenous communities in Abuja, Nigeria. The study identified the Gbágyì people as the major settlers amongst other minor settlers within the region. Although the study recognises the fact that the Gbágyì people are faced with challenges like disputes on farmlands, issues of economic marginalisation, and the impacts of modernization which culminates in the erosion of cultural practices and norms of the people; it also recognises the rich values the culture of the people imprints into the general communities within the region. It is right to state that current trends within these communities demonstrate the growing awareness and the careful efforts made by the Gbágyì community to protect their cultural and preserve their heritage. These are seen in efforts to strengthen the cultural affinity of the people by promoting their cultural festivals, crafts and traditional practices that symbolizes/epitomizes the relevance of communal lifestyle in heritage conservations. Finally, this study recognizes the relevance of personal identity as contained in the culture of these indigenous settlers and its contribution towards the acts of preserving cultural identity and embracing progress in their modern living within the Abuja region.

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