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**Regional Networking and Identity Integration within ECOWAS  
Framework on Development: An Exploration of Nigerian-Ivorian Corridor**

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## **Abstract**

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intends to transmute from “ECOWAS of States to ECOWAS of People”. This is, perhaps, due to inherent limitations in achieving its desired aims in the 1979 and 2003 “protocols on free movement of persons and goods” within the sub-region. This study examines the extent to which the ‘people’ interpret and re-interpret the intents of the protocols in their day-to-day living. Using the *Ejigbo-Nigerians* in Cote d’Ivoire, the study interrogates the pattern and potency of related cross-border positioning of identity in the realization of envisaged regional integration and development goals.

A fusion of both ‘Social Action’ and ‘Transnational Social Field’ theories has been engaged in the study. Being an exploratory research design, the study utilized primary data comprising of non-participant observation, 8 focus group discussions, 40 in-depth interviews and 6 case profiling; and secondary data, sourced through archives, historical documents and evaluation research. Purposive sampling method, which necessitated snowballing technique, was used in selecting the research subjects in both study locations of Ejigbo, Nigeria and Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire. The research instruments were designed in longitudinal and case study format; with the results transcribed, coded and interpreted using content analysis and ethnographic summary.

The contact of the Ejigbo-Nigerians with the Ivorian society predated the advent of colonial era. As such, there have been instances of intermarriages, which have led to transnational relationships along Ejigbo-Abidjan corridor; creating a real ‘borderless’ ECOWAS. Such intermarriages are contracted through interactions originated from Ejigbo through a social networking process that translates to social capital. Within Cote d’Ivoire, the Ejigbo-Yoruba have maintained a ‘dual identity’, enabled by the recognition of the institution of ‘Oba’ (Yoruba Kingship) in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such ‘dual identity’ entailed the network identity of ‘cooperation’ with the ‘host’ and ‘home’. Though intermarriage with the ‘host’ has been rife, the Ejigbo-Nigerians have sustained separate identities differentiated in terms of ‘household identity’ and a learnt ‘Ivorian identity’ often used within the public spaces as markets and offices. The existence of border posts, however, has continued to hinder the integration efforts of these people in the ECOWAS sub-region.

Socio-economic survival within the host country has been the underlying impetus for the Ejigbo-Yoruba's identification with the Ivorian society. The need for convenient re-integration into the Nigerian society thereafter has necessitated the sustenance of their Nigerian cleavage. It is, therefore, believed that the ongoing cross-border interaction, in line with the ECOWAS objectives, is capable of fostering larger regional integration and development if well harnessed.

**Keywords:** regional network, migrants, identity integration, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, ECOWAS