




Rewriting the Richness of Ethnic Diversities: Tales of Rural-Urban Migrants' in Mathare Informal Settlement in Nairobi City County-Kenya

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Abstract

Africa's rapid urbanization, driven largely by rural–urban migration, has contributed to the formation of highly diverse urban spaces. Despite this growing heterogeneity, ethnic-based tensions in informal urban settlements continue to threaten peace, cohesiveness and national stability. This study examined the extent to which ethnic mixing in urban informal settlements can promote interethnic tolerance and coexistence. Using an interpretive research design, the study integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the experiences of migrants living in Mathare informal settlement, Nairobi City County, who had moved from mono-ethnic rural regions in the country. The study findings showed that multi-ethnic urban environments facilitate cultural learning, reduce prejudicial attitudes, enhance cooperation, and strengthen trust across ethnic lines. The results indicated that these processes cumulatively strengthened social relations and promoted more inclusive forms of belonging. The study concluded by arguing that ethnic mixing offers a viable and underutilised strategy for cultivating ethnic understanding and advancing social cohesion within multi-ethnic societies.

Keywords:

Diversity, ethnicity, intolerance, informal settlements, out-groups, rural-urban migrations

Introduction

Africa is renowned for its rich cultural diversity, reflected in the multitude of cultural practices, belief systems, and linguistic traditions across its population. The continent is home to more than three thousand ethnic groups, making ethnic diversity one of its most defining characteristics. While these diversities are considered an invaluable heritage, many African countries continue to grapple

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with ethnic-related conflicts that result in the loss of lives and property, displacement of communities, and socio-economic setbacks that threaten national stability.

In Kenya, where this study was conducted, ethnic tensions have been attributed to several factors, including the politicization of ethnicity, unequal development, and perceived marginalization of certain communities (Miguel, 2014; Kioli, 2012). Kenya's history of ethnic intolerance stretches from the precolonial era to the postcolonial period (Mutie *et al.*, 2015; Kasomo, 2012; Lynch, 2006). Consequently, ethnicity has long been used as a lens for explaining civil unrest, conflict, and political hostilities in many African multi-ethnic nations (Irobi, 2005; Kanyinga & Long, 2012). Wamwere (2003) similarly maintains that ethnicity itself is not inherently harmful. Rather, it becomes problematic when ethnic identity is manipulated to promote hatred, exclusion, or notions of superiority. Wamwere refers to this phenomenon as “negative ethnicity,” a condition in which one group perceives itself as superior to others or feels inferior and threatened by others. According to Wamwere, ethnicity functions as a duality: Ethnic pride, which is positive and rooted in cultural heritage; and ethnic inferiority, which may lead to mistrust, tension, and conflict. While scholars such as Nyamnjoh and Brudvig (2014) highlight the richness that comes from social conviviality and interconnectedness, other intellectuals view multiculturalism as a potential threat to social cohesion. Debates continue between proponents of ethnic pluralism (the “salad bowl”) and advocates of assimilation (the “melting pot”), advocate for dissolving ethnic boundaries in favor of a unified national identity (Berray, 2019; Advani & Reich, 2015).

This study explores ethnic mixing as a viable strategy for fostering ethnic understanding and peaceful coexistence in multi-ethnic nations. It argues that, given the growing pluralistic spaces shaped by migration and increased cultural interaction, urban diversity—particularly in multi-ethnic informal settlements—can serve as an important tool for teaching ethnic tolerance and strengthening social cohesion, while still allowing communities to maintain their unique cultural identities.

Methodology

Study Design

The study utilized interpretative research design, which allows integration of both qualitative and quantitative data. It examined rural-urban migrants at Mathare informal settlement of Nairobi City County–Kenya, who had migrated from their rural mono-ethnic regions to the city and had been living in the multi-ethnic informal settlement for not less than five years. Participants were drawn from three villages, namely; Kiamutisya, 3C, and Mashimoni. Mathare informal settlement is densely populated and among the most preferred settlement areas by rural-urban migrants due to its proximity to the city center and relatively cheap cost of living. The high population density in a considerably limited space gives little or no room for private life and anonymity. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to gather data. It utilized a combination of secondary and primary data sources. Secondary data were obtained during the literature review; where the researcher examined relevant scholarly articles, government reports, policy briefs, and

past theories. This secondary data was crucial for the study, as it highlighted existing gaps on the subject under investigation.

Participants and Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling technique to draw participants for the study. This technique allowed the identification and selection of participants who had wide experience on inter-ethnic mixing. The study was in two phases. In the first phase we employed survey method to eighty purposefully selected participants using a questionnaire. Participants were purposefully identified through the help of village elders who had great knowledge about the residents, were well known and respected in the area. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions. It was utilized to obtain key demographic characteristics of the participants that were crucial for the study such as ethnicity, age, sex, marital status, level of education, rural origin and length of stay in Mathare informal settlement.

Data Collection Instruments

The survey data was analyzed. The quantitative data obtained from the survey was then used as a guide to purposefully participants for the in-depth interviews. The main aim was to achieve the highest and widest diversity representation in the study; by obtaining participants with varying lengths of stay, rural origins, ethnicities, ages, marital statuses, level of education and gender. Further, the quantitative data helped check out any potential bias that could have happened in the initial selection, providing a balanced representation of the respondents. The main aim of the in-depth interviews was to obtain rich information from the participants by allowing them narrate their stories in their own voices and in their best way. To enhance validity, the research employed multiple methods (triangulation) in the collection of data; where survey and in-depth interviews complimented by focus group discussion and key informant interviews were employed.

Data Analysis

Due to the large volume of data obtained from the in-depth interviews, the researcher adopted a step-by-step analysis procedure of the data. This involved the construction of analysis matrix that allowed a thematic organization of collected data and a systematic 'reductionist' procedure to analyze and interpret the findings of the study. Matrix 1 (Table 1) was used to capture the background information of participants. In this matrix where each respondent was assigned a special identification code that would be used to compile their information in the subsequent matrices.

The second matrix (Table 2) was used to capture information obtained from each participant during the in-depth interviews. This matrix summarized the data from the in-depth interviews, capturing the recurring themes in each of the responses. This was meant to help organize and present the data in a simpler form for final analysis and interpretation. Further, interpretation and presentation of the study findings was done through direct reporting of the participants' feedback.

Table 1

Questionnaire Matrix for background data

Participants Background Information							
Code	Age	Level of education	Marital status	Ethnicity	Rural origin	Period of stay	Residential village
001	58	Primary	Married	Luhya-Maragoli	Western-Mumias	32	Mashimoni
042	71	Adult literacy	Single	Kikuyu	Central-Limuru	>50	Kiamutisya

Table 2

Questions Guided by the Themes of the Study

	Characteristics of migrant	Nature of inter-ethnic activities and motives for joining	Obstacles to inter-ethnic engagement	Past initiatives to promote ethnic integration	Suggestions/recommendations from participants
001	-Came to the city at 17yrs -Lived here for more than 40 years -From Western, a Luhya-Maragoli.	-In community groups, in the church, in residential plots, in places of work, in matatus.	-Political incitement. -Past experiences, stereotypes and, culture. -Unemployment.	- Government initiatives i.e. NCIC, TJRC and, Constitution: Not known. -NCIC has no impact.	-Disband the NCIC -Involve the people -Tame politicians -Fight corruption, especially among the police

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the commencement of data collection, the researchers obtained a research permit from the National Commission of Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI); Licence number NACOSTI/P/20/6819. The researcher made contacts with the local leaders in the study area prior to the commencement of data collection and explained to them about the study. In regard to their interactions and involvement with the participants, the researchers ensured that the purpose of the study was clearly explained to all the participants. The researchers only engaged individuals who voluntarily offered to participate in the study.

Results

Migrants Understanding of Ethnicity and its Value

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The findings revealed that most migrants did not regard ethnic identity as fixed or as a defining aspect of their daily lives. Out of the eighty participants surveyed, seventy-two defined ethnicity primarily in terms of dialects, cultural practices, and traditions. Only two participants felt that ethnic diversity was harmful to national peace. However, both acknowledged personally benefiting from diversity while living in the city. Seventy-eight participants believed that social cohesion is achievable even in multi-ethnic nations such as Kenya. A large majority—seventy participants—strongly agreed that ethnic mixing promotes opportunities for cross-cultural learning. Seventy-eight participants also described people from other ethnic groups as generally friendly, approachable, and easy to interact with.

Notably, some migrants reported fluid or shifting ethnic identities. Two participants identified with more than one ethnic group due to intermarriage, while another identified with an ethnic group different from that of his parents because he had permanently migrated and established a home in a new region. A 33-year-old female participant, born to parents of different ethnicities, expressed dissatisfaction with the ethnic identity assigned to her by society and government institutions. She argued that individuals should have the autonomy to choose ethnic identities that reflect their lived experiences.

You see, i have always wanted to identify myself as a Kamba and a Kisii at the same time. My mother is Kamba and my father is Kisii. I am fluent in both dialects because I have lived in both rural areas. I feel that I should be referred to as a Kisii-Kamba from Nyamira and Kangundo, because both of these places are my rural homes and I can trace my blood line from relatives of both areas..... I keep wondering why people keep insisting that I am a Kisii and not a Kamba, yet that's not what I feel. I think we should be given the option to choose our ethnicity..... My mum has been married for so long, yet still in Kisii land she is referred to as a Kamba. She has lived with them and become like them in language, culture and residence. I think this is something that needs to change.

This narrative illustrated how ethnic identity can evolve over time due to socialization, mobility, or personal preference; emphasizing the dynamic and non-static nature of ethnicity.

Migrant Characteristics and Their Influence on Inter-Ethnic Interaction

In order to examine if and how migrant characteristics influenced migrants' integration with other ethnic groups, the study examined four migrant characteristics, namely: Ethnicity, level of education, age and length of stay in the multi-ethnic urban setting.

Age and Inter-Ethnic Cultural Tolerance

The study examined how age influenced the nature and depth of inter-ethnic engagements. Among the older migrants (aged 40 and above), fourteen of sixteen reported more meaningful and structured relationships with people from other ethnic backgrounds. Their interactions were often purposeful—such as joint businesses, shared property ownership, and long-term partnerships. Twelve older migrants described having developed significant trust toward other ethnic groups.

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Younger migrants (ages 18–35) reported more frequent but less structured inter-ethnic interactions. Nine out of eighteen described participating in various social activities—including sports, camping, cultural events, movie outings, and leisure activities—with peers from other ethnic communities. These interactions, although more casual, contributed to increased exposure to cultural diversity.

Level of Education

Among the twenty-four interview participants, only five felt that education influenced inter-ethnic interactions in the settlement. Three believed that their education enhanced their social status and enabled them to engage more confidently with individuals of different backgrounds. They also acted as representatives for NGOs, churches, and government organizations.

Conversely, two participants preferred not to reveal their academic qualifications due to fear of being perceived as outsiders or treated differently. One participant with a master's degree described deliberately downplaying her educational background to maintain equal and authentic relationships with neighbors. One of the respondents had this to say;

I have a master's degree in tourism but this is where I live ...(silence), if I had found a better job because of my academic qualification I probably would not be here. But fate brought me here. Most of my friends and neighbors around here never went beyond high school . Others dropped in primary school. Life has taught me to stoop a little bit low, forget about my academic achievements and focus on human relationships, not status based relationships..... None of them knows about my level of education and I love it that way.

Overall, educational level did not significantly influence communication or social relations. Swahili was the dominant language in the informal settlement—a language that seventy-four participants already spoke before migrating to the city. Interviews conducted largely in Swahili and Sheng further confirmed minimal communication barriers.

Length of stay in the multi-ethnic urban setting

More than 75% of migrants initially held strong attachments to their ethnic groups upon arriving in Nairobi City County. Thirteen out of the twenty-four reported that during the first months of migration, they preferred living and socializing with those from their own ethnic communities.

However, thirteen of the long-term migrants—those who had lived in Mathare informal settlement for over ten years—reported developing strong trust and deep social ties with individuals from other ethnic groups. Long-term residents were more likely to: Operate joint businesses, form long-lasting friendships, engage in formalized inter-ethnic activities, participate in intermarriages and, have children married into other communities.

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Impact of Ethnic Mixing

More than half of the participants reported significant benefits from cross-cultural engagements. Migrants engaged in joint business ventures attributed their success to complementary cultural skills and knowledge. They viewed cultural diversity as an avenue for: product diversification, broader market reach and , improved profitability. Several participants noted a rise in inter-ethnic marriages, which they believed cemented long-term cross-cultural relationships. These unions created lasting kinship ties and strengthened inter-community trust. Twelve respondents reported voluntarily adopting certain cultural practices from other communities. These included: marriage rituals, rites of passage, food preparation methods, linguistic expressions, religious practices, livelihood strategies. Participants emphasized that acculturation occurred naturally and without pressure.

Discussion

Migrants Understanding of Ethnicity and its Value

The study findings demonstrated that migrants valued their ethnic identities, viewing them as central to their sociocultural foundations. Ethnicity was described as a marker of one's roots, heritage, and values—hence the desire to preserve unique cultural identities. At the same time, migrants exhibited a strong openness to diversity. Participants praised the rich cultural diversity within Mathare informal settlement and across the country, while still maintaining loyalty to their own ethnic groups.

The narratives also revealed that ethnic identities are fluid, rather than fixed. Participants noted that ethnic identity could change over time due to factors such as marriage, migration, adoption, prolonged interactions and, personal preference. This fluidity challenges primordial theories of ethnicity, which define ethnic identity as rigid, innate, and unchangeable.

In contrast, the study did not record any significant influence of migrants' level of education on their inter-ethnic integration. Even participants with no formal schooling reported little difficulty in communication after the first few weeks in the city. Most migrants had acquired fluency in Swahili—and often Sheng—shortly after arriving in Nairobi. With Swahili serving as the lingua franca of the settlement, communication barriers were minimal. The interviews confirmed this. Although three participants preferred English, all frequently shifted between English, Swahili, and Sheng during conversations. The researcher's observations further validated that Swahili was widely spoken among residents of all ages.

Educational achievement did not appear to influence social relationships. Participants with diplomas and degrees often chose not to disclose their academic qualifications for fear of being treated differently or disrupting their social relations. This suggests that in the informal settlement, shared daily experiences outweighed educational differences in shaping social bonds.

Length of stay in the multi-ethnic urban setting

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The study found that migrants developed stronger interethnic understanding and trust the longer they lived in Mathare informal settlement. Many participants acknowledged holding stereotypes or negative perceptions of other ethnic groups prior to migrating to the city. These perceptions, often inherited from rural environments, were gradually challenged and replaced by first-hand experiences in the urban setting. Longer periods of exposure to multi-ethnic interactions resulted in: Increased levels of trust with other ethnic groups, greater cultural learning, acquisition of new dialects, more positive and lasting inter-ethnic relationships

These findings align with James and Bentley (2018), who argue that individuals living in ethnically diverse environments are more likely to form positive interethnic relationships. Participants described how early interactions in the city helped them invalidate rural-based myths, stereotypes and, fears about other communities. Jha (2008) similarly observes that ethnic mixing can foster positive intergroup bonds, reducing the likelihood of hostility. Amin and Thrift (2002) emphasize that urban environments encourage both intentional and incidental encounters, nurturing everyday practices of coexistence. The experiences shared by participants in this study strongly support these assertions. Extended stay in multi-ethnic spaces promotes behavioral and attitudinal transformation, leading to improved social cohesion.

The Impact of Ethnic Mixing

The findings highlight the transformative power of intergroup contact, consistent with Pettigrew's (1998) contact hypothesis. Participants reported that meaningful interactions enabled them to learn about other cultures, reduce fears, and develop greater comfort with outgroups. Contrary to Whittaker's (2012) argument that cultural complexity hinders peaceful coexistence, this study found migrants actively learning to accommodate and embrace cultural differences. Participants shared examples of cultural borrowing and adaptation in areas such as: Marriage rites, rites of passage, livelihood strategies, worship practices, language use, cuisine, and cooking methods. These forms of acculturation occurred voluntarily, with participants emphasizing that no coercion was involved.

Ethnic mixing led to increased trust among ethnic groups, cultural exchange of goods and services, appreciation of cultural diversity, formation of joint economic ventures, participation in crosscultural social activities. These findings directly challenge Alesina and La Ferrara (2000), who argue that ethnic diversity reduces cooperation. Instead, participants reported numerous positive social and economic benefits resulting from diversity, consistent with the findings of Bisin *et al.* (2008). Having direct interactions with outgroup members, rather than relying on inherited or secondhand narratives, helped reshape migrants' perspectives. Many participants converted cultural differences into opportunities for self-improvement, mutual support, and community cohesion.

Overall, ethnic mixing in Mathare informal settlement nurtured social harmony, cooperation, and cross-cultural understanding, with participants placing less emphasis on ethnic divisions and more on shared human relationships.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that multi-ethnic urban spaces offer fertile ground for promoting cultural learning, openness to diversity, cooperation, and trust among individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. These interactions enrich social relationships and foster harmonious coexistence, supporting the observations of Delhay and Newton (2005). The study underscores the inevitability of cultural mixing in contemporary urban environments, the importance of embracing diversity and, the potential for positive interethnic relations. It challenges Putnam's (2007) view that individuals living in ethnically diverse spaces tend to "hunker down." Instead, the findings demonstrate that migrants in Mathare informal settlement benefit significantly from exposure to ethnic diversity. Through daily interactions, they gain first-hand understanding of other cultural groups and transform initial stereotypes, fears, and biases into meaningful social bonds.

Consistent with *Bisin et al.* (2008), Alesina and Zhuravskaya (2011), and Tong (2009), the study shows that multi-ethnic spaces can expose individuals to the positive dimensions of diversity and create opportunities to benefit socially, culturally, and economically from these differences. Overall, the study concludes that inter-ethnic mixing plays a crucial role in fostering ethnic tolerance, nurturing deeper cultural appreciation, and enhancing cohesive coexistence in multi-ethnic societies. Multicultural environments can therefore be used as powerful platforms for teaching and promoting ethnic tolerance, ultimately contributing to more unified and harmonious communities.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Authorship Statement

We the Authors declare that each author contributed significantly to the conception, research, writing and preparation of the final work.

Research Approval

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