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# Hausa Hand-Embroidery and Local Development in Northern Nigeria

Elisha P. Renne

## Introduction

The Hausa people of Northern Nigeria have long been known for their production of voluminous robes known as *babban riga* (Heathcote 1972; Kriger 1988; Lamb and Holmes 1980; Perani and Wolff 1999; Picton and Mack 1979), which are hand-embroidered in a range of embroidery stitches, materials (mainly cotton and silk), styles, and designs (e.g., fig.1). Until recently, the embroidery of these robes was primarily done by men (Heathcote 1972, 1979). However, women have taken up this work (fig. 2) in the past twenty years, as men have turned to machine embroidery and other occupations, though women generally sell their robes through male relations or dealers.

This paper considers the situation of Hausa women who hand-embroider in one of the major centers for hand-embroidery in Northern Nigeria, the old, walled section of the town of Zaria, known as Zaria City or Birnin Zazzau. Robes and kaftans, both hand-embroidered and machine-embroidered that are produced in Zaria City, are available in local shops and are marketed throughout Nigeria (fig. 3a-e). In other words, the production and marketing of these garments is big business and is the major occupation of many men and some women in Zaria City.

For these Zaria City women, hand-embroidery (*dinkin hannu*) is an important source of income and more accessible without a large cash outlay than other occupations open to them as one Zaria City woman explained:

Before I was selling soup ingredients but now I don't have money to buy them. But hand-embroidery, you can do it for people [without needing capital] and get money. And especially for us women who stay at home, it is good for us (Interview: QA-3, Zaria City, July 2002).

This woman is referring to the practice of seclusion by married Muslim Hausa women (Callaway 1987; Schildkrout 1983), whose respectability (*mutunci*) rests on their staying at home during the day, while going out under cover of darkness—to visit and pay condolence calls as well as go to Islamic schools at night. Hand-embroidery of *babban riga* is a particularly suitable occupation for these women as they can work in their homes. However, as will be seen, this situation puts women at a disadvantage when it comes to marketing, particularly if they are producing robes on their own and not doing piece work for someone else. In such cases, they are at a double disadvantage. First, they are subject to the vagaries of the market, as one woman noted:

Before, if you take a *babban riga* to the tailor to sew it, before he is finished he will find someone to buy it...But now there is no such thing unless you are lucky and you have people like those who have titles [i.e., are rich], who will buy them from you, then you'll get a profit (Interview: FEAP-RI-4, Zaria City, July 2002).

Second, they face the problem of the honesty of those who are selling robes for them. For example, one woman had to take a man to court to recover some of the money from a robe he had taken to sell for her. The issue of marketing will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

Despite these problems, hand-embroidery has become a principal occupation for Zaria City women, who have used capital provided by government programs to buy the

necessary materials (imported cotton brocade, locally made cotton muslin backing, thread) and labor to produce *babban riga* robes. This paper examines two such government micro-credit programs, the Federal Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) and the Nigerian Agricultural Co-op and Rural Development Bank Ltd. (NACRDB), and their consequences for women embroiderers as well as one non-governmental program, Queen Amina Embroidery, started by the author to market hand-embroidered items for sale in the U.S. Before discussing these programs for the craft-production as sources of income for these women—which also reflect some of the larger problems associated with artisan enterprises more generally—the specifics of these three programs are discussed in the following section.

### The FEAP (Federal Economic Advancement Programme) Micro-Credit Program

The idea behind the FEAP program as outlined in its official literature was to foster the formation of cooperative societies and to provide their members with loans to be used for setting up or running local, small-scale businesses that would “alleviate poverty and promote investment” (Aliyu 1997, 1-2). In Zaria, the FEAP program was administered by the Cooperative Societies Office, which provided loan applicants with forms and advice. During the period from 1997-1999, thirty-nine loans ranging from N100,000 to N400,000 were distributed to 13 women’s cooperatives, 21 men’s cooperatives, and 5 mixed cooperatives in Zaria Local Government through the FEAP loan program. In order to obtain a FEAP loan—which was modeled on the Grameen Bank micro-credit loan scheme (Khandker et al. 1995), applicants needed to obtain cooperative society status. Once a group had obtained a cooperative registration certificate and had purchased a loan application, forms were filled out and submitted to the State Coordinating Committee, along with a list of group members, the name of an acceptable guarantor, and evidence of a bank account with a minimum deposit of N50,000. Aside from raising money and filling out forms, women cooperative leaders also attended training meetings at the Cooperative Society Office at Sabon Gari, Zaria, a time-consuming process which often included trips to other government offices and to the group’s bank (see Buvinic 1986). One Zaria City women’s cooperative group was advised to use part of their N200,000 loan to do farming as a group venture, even though several members were hand-embroiderers and would have preferred to use their loan to expand this work. However, they took the FEAP advisor’s advice, using N150,000 to rent land, hire laborers, and purchasing maize and guinea corn seed. The remaining N50,000 was divided among individual cooperative members, in amounts ranging between N1,000 and N2,000. This was in early 1999.

When interviewed in July 2002, neither the group loan nor the individual loans had been entirely repaid, although the six women re-interviewed had managed to repay most of their individual loans. Ironically, it was through the proceeds from sales of *babban riga* (along with the embroidery and/or knitting of caps) that enabled these women to repay their individual loans. It was their foray into a non-craft businesses that left them in debt:

The farming we did, we lost on the farm. That is why we haven’t finished paying the debt up until now. It is the *babban riga* we did, we made some money and paid part of the loan with it. The loan I collected individually, I’ve repaid it all

but N130, which remains for me to pay (Interview: FEAP-RI-3, Zaria City, July 2002).

The robes that these women embroidered and did manage to sell, however, reflect the constrained economic situation of the current political regime in Nigeria. The designs are smaller—there is less embroidery on them as compared with the more elaborately embroidered styles such as *aska biyu*—and subsequently less expensive (fig. 4). The new robes are also lighter in weight and have names that reflect the civilian government, names such as Secretariat, Abuja (the federal capital of Nigeria), and Makarfi (the Governor of Kaduna State), additional factors contributing to their popularity.

The Nigerian Agricultural Co-operative and Rural Development Bank, Ltd.

In 2001, the Nigerian Agricultural and Rural Development Bank, Ltd. merged with the defunct People's Bank, another government micro-credit loan program (Institute of African Studies 1991), to form the Nigerian Agricultural Co-operative and Rural Development Bank, Ltd., (NACRDB) which offered loans to individuals based on saving accounts deposit size. Seven women from one group who participated in the FEAP loan program also applied for individual loans from this bank, as one woman explained:

They started by giving us N4,000 [each], we paid it back and they gave us N8,000 again. We paid the \$8,000 back and they gave us \$14,000 again. But now they are complaining that people don't repay their loans, so they have to keep the money before releasing it...But I'm going to receive another loan very soon (Interview: FEAP, RI-2, 8 July 2002, Zaria).

This woman (as well as the other six) used her loan to buy materials to make *babban riga*, which were then sold at a profit so that she was able to repay the bank within the six-month time limit:

I'm still doing *dinkin hannu* and I'm selling *babban riga* from N7,000 to N12,000. And it is my husband who is taking them out to sell. That is his work. He is taking them to dealers who take them to different towns to sell. I'm getting money to repay the loans from the profits I've made selling *babban riga* (Interview: FEAP-RI-2, 8 July 2002, Zaria).

While this program is limited to those who can raise the initial capital and thus who are not pooling their resources as a group, it appears that this approach is more practical for women since it allows for individual choice on how they will invest their loans.

### Queen Amina Embroidery

The third "program" sponsoring hand-embroidery in Zaria City is a non-profit business known as Queen Amina Embroidery (referring to the 16<sup>th</sup> century ruler of the Zazzau Emirate, Queen Amina). Through this program, 10-15 Zaria City women receive embroidery materials to produce specified items in two particular Hausa embroidery styles, mainly for sale in the U.S. The first style utilizes embroidery designs and stitches used in *babban riga* robes (including chain stitch, buttonhole stitch, and rosette buttonhole stitch [Menzel 1972, 99-106; see also Boser 1984]) made into table linens, pillow covers, bags, and kaftans, using cotton thread and cotton damask fabric (fig. 5a). The second style, formerly used by Hausa women to decorate bed linens, utilizes brightly colored cotton thread in an interlocking satin stitch (cf. Menzel 1972:141-42) on white

cotton cloth in depictions of flowers, animals, and bicycles (fig. 5b). These embroideries are sold as wall hangings.

One Zaria woman, Mrs. Hassana Tanimu, marks the pattern designs on the foundation cloths and manages the distribution of all materials to Zaria City women. She regularly visits them to pick up completed work and to pay them. She also buys materials at Zaria City market, selects appropriately colored threads, and takes embroidered pieces to a Zaria City seamstress for finishing. Initially I did final finishing (washing and ironing) however this is now done in Zaria City. Presently, my main responsibility is marketing, which I've done with mixed results since 1997. Queen Amina Embroidery work has been sold through the Studio Museum of Harlem Museum Shop, through the African Studies Association meetings marketplace, and privately, through word of mouth.

### Marketing Zaria City Women's Hand-Embroidery

The problem of marketing Queen Amina Embroidery has affected the amount of work I have been able to commission from Zaria City women embroiderers. This has partly been the result of my inability to take time to find appropriate outlets, partly because I have not developed items that are highly popular, and partly because of the fickleness of craft markets (e.g., sales of table linens at the Studio Museum of Harlem were brisk at first and then dwindled). While I sold over \$1,000 worth of embroidery at the 1998 African Studies Association marketplace, the high booth fee considerably reduced profits. This inability to find adequate outlets for these women's work and hence the limited amount of embroidery ordered is reflected in Zaria City women's comments about the Queen Amina program:

The thing that would improve things—if there were more work because I can do two pillows in a day but now there is only work for one pillow a day. If there were more work and the money could be increased, I would be happy (QA-6, 4 July 02, Anguwar Magajiya, Zaria City).

While providing materials for women in their homes and paying them on completion of their work are two advantages of working for this program, adequate marketing is the major problem, as I see it, for the Queen Amina Embroidery project.

### Present Problems of Marketing

Aside from my own difficulties of marketing Queen Amina Embroidery work, Zaria City women embroiderers are having their own problems, some of which have to do with the economy, some with changing dress fashions, and some with their restricted access to markets. For example, one woman described the current situation in Nigeria as one where supply exceeds demand:

To me, the problem began because *babban riga* are too many now. And we don't have people who can buy them. Even if you want to sell a *babban riga* for N4,000, it's difficult to get the N4,000. Even those who come from Abuja and Lagos to sell [i.e., dealers], they will only buy them from N3,000. So instead of your getting N1,000 profit, it's difficult even to get your money back (Interview: FEAP RI-4, Zaria City, 8 July 2002).

Women also had problems when giving completed *babban riga* to dealers to sell for them:

Sometime you give the riga to dealers, you will not get your money and you will not get the riga back. There was a time when I had that problem because you will give them to one man, he will give it to another. It was *tokare* [an expensive type of doubled-fabric robe] he gave it another man and I never received the money (Interview: FEAP RI-6, Zaria City, 8 July 2002).

Because adult married Hausa women in Zaria City do not personally sell their work in local markets because of the practice of seclusion, they are particularly vulnerable to this problem.

However not all women encountered these problems of lack of demand and deception in marketing. For example, one woman, Hajiya Aisha [a pseudonym], who has a reputation for outstanding embroidery work and who also had a brother who was selling robes for her was doing very well. She recently had completed three *babban riga* and when I went back two weeks later, she had already sold one—which sold last year for N3,200, around \$30US. She explained other women's lack of economic success selling their embroidery work as follows:

The problem is that the women don't have money to do *babban riga*. They'd like to but they don't have money. The second problem is if they have money to do the work, they don't know how to market it. So these are the two problems facing them because our religion doesn't allow women to go out and sell it [their embroidery] for themselves. But the problem is solved if you know the way to market it and you have money to do the work (Interview: QA-4, 3 July 2002, Zaria City).

While Hajiya Aisha also does work for Queen Amina Embroidery, she makes more money from privately embroidering *babban riga* for sale, despite the fact that she has never taken a government loan. She, along with four other Zaria City women interviewed, have successful businesses embroidering men's robes for sale, based on small initial capital (some were given pieces of cloth as gifts) and having a reliable person for marketing. Of these five women, three have gone to Mecca on hajj using the proceeds of their businesses.

#### Micro-Credit and Artisan Enterprises in Zaria City

Hajiya Aisha's comments astutely sum up, not only the problems for Zaria City women embroiderers but also for artisan producers more generally. Even when given capital through loan programs or from other sources, some women are unable to sell their embroidered work. This is equally the case of individual women embroiderers who do not have reliable assistance in taking their robes to prospective clients and of women doing work for the Queen Amina Embroidery project. If, however, a woman has good outlets for her work, of the three sources of capital available to Zaria City women, individual loans made available through the Nigerian Agricultural Co-op and Rural Development Bank presently offers the best prospects for income generation. If the Queen Amina Embroidery project is able to cultivate the expatriate market in Nigeria and expand sales in the US, this would be a useful outlet for women who are unable to find reliable individuals to market their work for them. The least useful of the three programs described above is the group microcredit loans given to women under FEAP because

program officers neither allowed women to use their own judgment in investing their loans nor helped them in marketing their products.

Under the current circumstances in Nigeria, the production of *babban riga* by Zaria City women is a valuable income-generating option for women whose opportunities are circumscribed by local practices and beliefs as well as a declining economy (Coles 1991). The argument that craft cooperatives undermine women's development by placing them in low-paying work does not entirely apply in this case, when cultural practices and economic contingencies restrict the work they feel they can do. While hand-embroidery production may reinforce prevailing gendered work stereotypes in some areas, this assessment of hand-embroidery is more complicated since women have taken up an occupation, the embroidery of *babban riga* that was solely men's work. However, as Khan et al. (1988) have noted in the case of women's embroidery in Pakistan, projects which do not challenge the existing bases of gender-linked occupations may hamper women's economic autonomy:

Unfortunately, the very acceptability of embroidery as a "feminine" and "genteel" occupation will help bolster the many myths of "feminine" as opposed to "masculine" occupations. Then too, the fact that it allows women to remain inside their homes reinforces the already prevailing tendencies to positively view segregation and purdah as enhancing local status, which in the long term, may be detrimental to women's independence and to their status in society (Khan et al. 1988, 87).

In the case of Zaria City, the point that embroidery work reinforces the positive view of seclusion is probably correct in this case. The fact that many men have moved into more remunerative machine-embroidery work also supports that contention that women's hand embroidery does not offer real economic benefits or social status in the long term. However, in the short term, women who have access to some initial capital and who have a regular system for marketing have benefited to some extent from hand-embroidery work (fig. 6).

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Fig. 1. *Babban riga*, *aska takwas* (eight knives) pattern; green cotton embroidery on white cotton damask. Cotton damask is



Fig. 2. Woman embroidering *babban riga*. Zaria City, Nigeria, November 1994. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 3a. Young man drawing design on cut pieces of cotton damask, using sorghum stem pen and reddish ink, made from sorghum leaf-sheaths and potash (Heathcote 1979:168). Zaria City, Nigeria, December 1994. Photograph by the author.

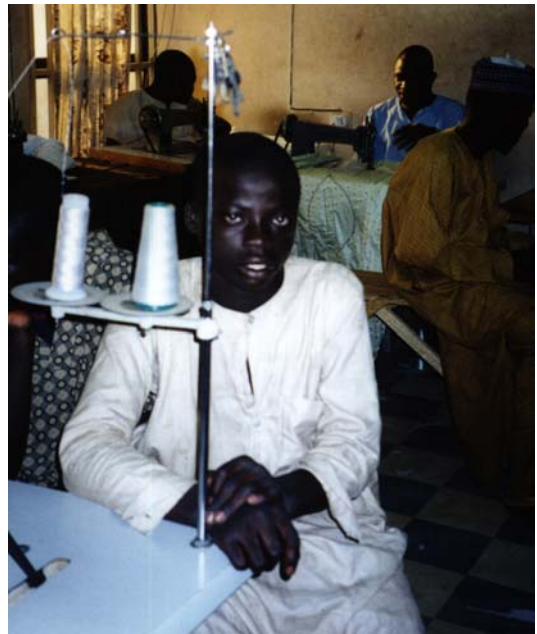


Fig. 3b. Tailors constructing robes and machine embroidering kaftans. Zaria City, Nigeria, March 2001. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 3c. Man washing completed *babban riga*, before spreading them on the ground to dry. Zaria City, July 1996. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 3d. Men beating washed *babban riga* with mallets on wood log set in ground. Zaria City, Nigeria, July 1996. Photograph by the author.





Fig. 3e. Man wrapping kaftans for sale in Zaria City shop. Zaria City, Nigeria, March 2001. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 4. *Babban riga* design style, ‘Yar Dikwa (“Daughter of Dikwa,” also known as ‘Yar Bornu (“Daughter of Bornu”); see Heathcote 1979:279) with reduced hand-embroidery. Zaria City, Nigeria, March 2001. Photograph by the author.





Fig. 5a. Hand-embroidered pillow cover, using design known as *Bita da kallo* (“Always looking”), derived from embroidered *babban riga* robes, for Queen Amina Embroidery. Zaria City, Nigeria, August 2002. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 5b. Hand-embroidered wall-hanging, using designs derived from women’s embroidered bedsheets, for Queen Amina Embroidery. Zaria City, Nigeria, August 2002. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 6. Zaria City woman hand-embroidering pillow covers for sale through Queen Amina Embroidery. Zaria City, Nigeria, July 1997. Photograph by the author.