



Trading and Occupational Activities of the Hausa Through Their Oral Songs

by

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Abstract

The Hausa people, known for their language and culture, inhabit regions across West Africa. Their origins are debated, but the Bayajida legend is widely recognised. The Hausa language is a vital lingua franca in Northern Nigeria and beyond. Orature, the oral transmission of literature, is central to the Hausa tradition. This includes fables, myths, and diverse forms of poetry. Hausa literature is rich, encompassing both oral and written works. Ajami script was used for religious texts, while Boko script marked the start of modern prose. Major literary categories include fiction, plays, poetry (*wakoki*), epithets, and proverbs. This paper focuses on *wakoki*, exploring how they reflect Hausa trading and occupational activities. These songs reach a wide audience through radio and other means of broadcast. Hausa oral songs are classified into various types, including occupational songs. Work songs, in particular, lighten the burden of labour. They bring cheer and energy to tasks like grinding and farming. The Hausa economy, historically based on agriculture and industry, is reflected in these songs. The Hausa are skilled farmers, traders, and craftspeople. Their organized markets and diverse occupations are celebrated in *wakoki*. Singers like Sarkin Taushin Katsina highlight the historical presence of traditional occupations. Alhaji Mamman Shata Katsina's songs encourage participation in economic activities and praise individuals for their contributions. Shehu Ajilo's and Ibrahim Narambada's songs emphasise the importance of farming and various crafts. The paper concludes that Hausa oral songs serve as valuable records of Hausa's economic and occupational practices. They show the close connection between Hausa's verbal art and daily life. The interpretations presented are not exhaustive, as these songs can have multiple meanings depending on context and audience.

Keywords: Trading, Occupations, Hausa, Oral Songs,

Introduction

Both the people and their language are referred to as Hausa. According to Furniss (1995); Hausa is spoken by more than fifty (50) people in the areas of Nigeria, Niger, Northern Ghana and in some communities from Senegal and Sudan. He added that the 1991 Nigerian census figures of the population are eighty-eight (88), (Furniss, 1995:7).

However, the origin of the people remains a contested one amongst historians, linguists and anthropologists. For this reason, there are various views regarding their origin, although the Bayajida legend seems to be the widely accepted view since,

The legend of *Bayajida* is held by the Hausa people to be a true account of their emergence as a society and the origin of the foundation of their seven states, (Yahaya, 1979:68).

On the position the language occupies, Hickey, (1986) believes that Hausa is the most widely spoken language among the Chadic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language group. It is the lingua franca of Northern Nigeria and the second most widely used language in Africa. It is second to none in terms of numerical strength in Africa. This is why Hausa remains the lingua franca to many of them in these West African countries. These people use the language as the vehicle of communication in their daily activities. The said language serves as a unifying force among the people.

Other Considerations

Perhaps, it is important to note that the intricate relationship between the Hausa people's trading and occupational activities and their rich oral song tradition reveals a profound cultural repository. These songs, beyond celebrating the status of sovereigns, serve as dynamic narratives that encapsulate social values, economic practices, and historical experiences, offering a multifaceted understanding of Hausa society.

Hausa oral songs frequently exalt sovereigns, positioning them as pivotal figures in both trade and governance. As Kurawa & Sani (2025) highlight, these songs underscore the community's identity, emphasising the crucial role of leadership in fostering trade and social cohesion. This portrayal not only legitimises the sovereign's authority but also reinforces the interconnectedness of political and economic life within the Hausa context.

The expansive trade networks established by the Hausa are vividly documented within their oral traditions. Notably, in regions like Brussels, where economic migrants engage in the car trade (Sardo, 2012), these songs narrate the journeys and experiences of traders. They illuminate the challenges and triumphs encountered in their occupational endeavors, providing a historical and personal dimension to economic activities. This focus on trade highlights the Hausa people's entrepreneurial spirit and their ability to adapt to diverse economic landscapes.

The language employed in Hausa songs acts as a powerful metalinguistic tool, allowing performers to delve into trade and social interactions through metaphor and narrative. As Hunter & Oumarou (1998) suggest, this linguistic creativity enriches the cultural depth of the songs, making them integral to Hausa identity and economic discourse. Further supporting this, Jang (2010) reinforces the importance of this form of verbal art. This creative expression allows for nuanced discussions of complex economic and social issues, transforming songs into vital vehicles for transmitting cultural knowledge and values.

While celebrating the achievements of traders and sovereigns, Hausa's oral songs also provide a more nuanced understanding of community life. They reflect the struggles and adversities faced, offering a balanced perspective that transcends purely economic narratives. This dual portrayal of success and hardship ensures that the songs serve as a comprehensive reflection of the Hausa experience, capturing the full spectrum of their social and economic realities. Thus, the oral songs of the Hausa people function as a living archive, weaving together economic practices, social values, and historical narratives into a vibrant tapestry of cultural expression.

Orature

Oral literature or orature is a vital form of cultural expression. It involves stories, songs, and other forms of literature passed down by word of mouth. This transmission occurs from one generation to the next. Orature exists across the globe, in both European and African cultures. Before writing was invented, all cultures relied on orature. As Thompson (1973) suggests, the invention of writing in Sumer and Egypt marked a significant shift. Prior to this, all cultures shared their knowledge, customs, and values through spoken words. This meant that stories, histories, and important teachings were memorised and recited.

Orature plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage. It allows communities to maintain their identity and traditions. Through spoken narratives, people learn about their history, beliefs, and social norms. These oral traditions often contain valuable lessons and insights that are relevant to each generation. The power of orature lies in its ability to connect people. It fosters a sense of community and shared experience. When stories are told aloud, they create a dynamic and interactive environment. This allows for a deeper engagement with the material and strengthens the bonds between individuals. Orature is a fundamental aspect of human culture. It serves as a bridge between the past and the present, ensuring that cultural knowledge is preserved and transmitted. Its importance cannot be overstated, as it continues to enrich and shape communities around the world.

Hausa Literature

The Hausa people possess a vibrant and extensive heritage of oral traditions. These traditions encompass a diverse range of narrative forms, including captivating fables, engaging

animal stories, and profound myths. These spoken tales have served as a cornerstone of Hausa culture for generations, transmitting knowledge, values, and entertainment through the power of the spoken word. The transition to written literature in Hausa began with the adoption of the *Ajami* script, a modified form of Arabic writing. This script was primarily employed for religious texts, catering to a readership seeking spiritual guidance and understanding. The use of *Ajami* marked an early step in the formal documentation of Hausa's thoughts and beliefs.

However, the first significant work of Hausa prose written in the Boko script, the Roman-based alphabet now widely used for the Hausa language, is attributed to J. Schon's "Magana Hausa". This publication represented a pivotal moment, signaling the emergence of a new era in Hausa literary expression. Following Schon's pioneering work, other Western scholars, including C.H. and J.A. Robinson, and Dr. D. Baikie, contributed to the study and documentation of the Hausa language and its literature. Their efforts played a crucial role in preserving and disseminating Hausa cultural knowledge to a wider audience.

A notable characteristic of early Hausa written literature is its deep connection to the rich reservoir of folklore. Many prominent Hausa authors drew inspiration from traditional oral narratives, incorporating familiar themes, characters, and motifs into their written works. For instance, Bello Kagara's "Gandoki" (1934), Muhammad Gwarzo's "Law Matambayi" (1934), and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's "Shehu Umar" (1968) are all examples of works that demonstrate this strong influence of folklore. These literary creations effectively bridged the gap between oral and written traditions.

The prevalence of folklore in these early written works highlights the profound significance of oral tradition within Hausa culture. It underscores the fact that these spoken narratives were not merely entertainment, but also valuable repositories of cultural wisdom and historical memory. Clearly, the old spoken stories significantly influenced the development of new written works. They provided a wealth of creative material for authors to draw upon, enriching the literary landscape of the Hausa language.

The shift from primarily oral to written forms of literature represents a significant evolution in how orature was shared and preserved. However, despite this transition, the fundamental roots of Hausa literature remain firmly embedded in the enduring legacy of its spoken tales. Thus, the interplay between oral and written traditions has shaped the unique character of Hausa literature, demonstrating the enduring power of storytelling to connect generations and preserve cultural heritage.

Categories of Hausa Literature

The most notable amongst the list of Hausa literature include the following:

1. Fiction (*Littafin Hira*)
2. Play (s) (*Wasa*, pl. *wasanni*)

3. Poetry (*Waka*, pl. *wakoki*)
4. Epithets (*Kirari*)
5. Proverbs (*Karin Magana*) (Skinner, 1980:1-6)

However, in this paper, the researchers shall look at poetry (*wakoki*) that reflect or portrays the trading and occupational activities of the Hausa as a people. O'neil (1988:1) defines "*Waka*" as both oral and written verses "this meaning has been extended to include "songs" as well as "poem". Mack (1986) has the same view as O'neil as she said that the term "*wakoki*" implies the concepts of songs as well as "poem". However, Mack is able to distinguish between the oral and written song "*waka*". According to her "they are diverse in style and theme as well as the circumstances in which they are delivered. Indeed, there are situations for which one type may not be substituted for another". According to Mack (1986:182), the oral song "*waka*" is appropriate to praise song for prestigious individuals, naming and wedding celebrations, spirit-entertainment in both private and public places". Indeed, there are also *wakoki* on trading, occupations, and other things.

The difference between the oral songs and the written songs can be that of prestige. The oral performers are usually shunned and disregarded. The writer of verse is mostly well respected whether it is a woman or a man. According to Mack (1986:186) "In contrast to the oral poet, the writer of the verse is usually respected as a scholar and is known as an author rather than as an entertainer".

O'Neil (1988:1) also made a similar point because according to her the oral poets are not respected despite the substantial wealth they get. According to her; "in spite of the substantial wealth that might accrue to a performer; these entertainers rarely enjoyed a respected social status".

Like their male counterpart, Hausa women singers are not usually respected, yet many people invite them during weddings and naming ceremonies to entertain the gathering. Apart from entertainment, many of the songs create awareness in their fellow women who are secluded. A Hausa woman singer Binta Katsina is well known for her song "advocating women's participation in the Nigerian work force". In her song, she tries to encourage Nigerian women to participate in "every kind of work ...".

You should do every kind of work,
You should know every kind of work;
You can write papers, you can pound the
Typewriter, you can fly airplanes, you know
How to be in the office, you could do the government
Work, and you could be the police workers, you could do
Customs work, let's give you the chance, women of

Nigeria, women, women of Nigeria, you know

Every kind of work. (Mack 1986:189).

Also, Barmani Choge is one of such singers as she sings to educate and enlighten women. In one of her songs titled “*Sakarya, ba ta da wayo*” meaning “useless who is not sensible”; she called on women to take up trades. She particularly emphasised that women who have not been educated should take up a trade as she says:

“Duk wanda bai ilimi ba ta je ta koyi sana’a”

Translation :

“Whoever is not educated should go and learn a trade”.

She as well sang on many themes such as advocating neatness, calling for peace and harmony in polygamy, comforting women jeered for lack of child spacing, the mischief of old women and many others. Beverly Mark (1986:188) stated that:

When their works are broadcast on local radio stations
They reach their audience without requiring secluded
Women to leave their homes, such broadcasts also mean
That these works have impact the novels cannot hope to
Have among the illiterates.

In fact, oral songs are very important and useful tools of enlightenment to both the literates and illiterates. The illiterates learn a lot from these songs and get educated.

Types of Songs

Na Allah (1994:104) divided oral songs into several categories. These include praise poetry, religious poetry, funeral poetry, occupational poetry, heroic poetry, lullabies and incantations. Nyuidze (1995:50) has also classified oral songs into various categories. These include government enlightenment and propaganda songs, war songs, political songs, historical songs, praise songs, dirges and philosophical songs. Also, Usman (2003) categorised oral songs into lullabies, wedding songs, works songs and grinding songs. However, the paper is concerned with oral songs on the economic, trading and occupational activities of the Hausa. But, before presenting the analysis of the songs, the researchers have a general though brief note on works songs in general as they affect all the Hausa people’s economic, trading and occupational works.

Work Songs

These are songs sung to lighten the labour. Many labourious works such as grinding, farming and knitting which are some of the Hausa occupations are too burdensome. Songs help to lighten the workers’ mood and make the burden less as the songs make them more cheerful and also more energetic. Usman (2003:20) states “works songs lighten the labour and give an opportunity however limited for poetic and musical expressions in the midst of work”.

Trading and Occupational Activities of the Hausa

The economy of Hausaland was and is still based on its agricultural and industrial productions. Both are based on manual operations. The outputs are for domestic and foreign consumption. Some of the crops that are produced include cotton, Guinea corn, groundnut, millet, maize and rice. On the side of industrial products, Hausaland can be described to be the source of textile and leather products in West Africa. The work was done only by slaves and labourers. In his comment on Hausa with regard to handling their economic activities, Strides and Ifeka (1971:80) confirm that “the Hausa are also well skilled in trade and handcraft”. In addition to the above the Hausa also have an organised market structure. The people selling similar products are placed in one section of the market. There are also sales agents for both local and foreign products.

On the trading and occupational activities of the Hausa it is important to know that apart from being agriculturalists, they are also traders, courtiers, blacksmiths, hunters, craftsmen, musicians and carpenters. They were good domestic and foreign traders, Kano, the biggest Hausa city, and Katsina were the largest centres of commerce in Hausaland. In Hausa states, industries

Oral Songs on Trading, Economic and Occupational Activities of the Hausa

The economic and occupation activities of the Hausa are well reflected in their oral songs. Shata believes:

*Kudi a kashe shi ta hanya mai kyau,
Kudi a kashe shi ta hanya mai kyau*

Translation:

Money should be spent judiciously,
Money should be spent judiciously.

Also, we can see, how historically, the Hausa singer, Sarkin Taushin Katsina, presents Hausa People's occupation that had been there with them even before the arrival of the whitemen in Hausaland. He says:

Lead: *Ka ji zakkuwar Turawa,
Sun tarar da mu muna da sana 'ar hannu,*

Chorus: *Muna da al'adunmu na gargajiya,
Da za mu gadara mu ma,*

Lead : *Akwai makera na mu,
Kuma da sakkarawa na mu,
Kuma akwai magina na mu,
Kuma akwai majema na mu,
Kuma muna da dukawan mu,*

*Kuma muna da wanzaman mu,
Kuma muna da mata ma su zare,
Nan kasar mu ga marina ga baba,
Akwai masaka na mu na gargajiya,
Da kai mana saka tun can.*

(Wakar al'adun gargajiya).

Translation:

Lead: Before the arrival of colonial masters,
They met us with our handicrafts/occupations.

Chorus: We have our traditions,
That we are proud of,

Lead: There are our blacksmiths,
And, we have our sakkarawa,
And, we have our builders,
And, we have our leather processors,
And, we have our cobblers,
And, we have our barbers,
We also have women with thread,
In our country, there are dyers,
There are traditional weavers,
That weaved for us long ago.

The songs seem to be a warning and reminder to the Hausa not to be carried away by the new occupations brought by the Whiteman. Indeed, there are theirs which are both traditional and hereditary. They had different styles for different occupations.

Alhaji Mamman Shata Katsina sang many songs on different occupations and trading activities of the Hausa and even some people whose trading and economic activities were promoted as a result of the songs. Hajiya Hauwa Maituwo Matar Lado (on her food selling), Sarki Bakwai na Sabon Birni's song for Garage leader, Alhaji Ali Bagobiri (on his leadership), Malam Babba na kofar Gabas in honour of the famous Azare teacher in Bauchi State and Sarkin Bori Sule's song for the famous herbalist from Rigasa, Kaduna State. All these songs are in praise of the people for their occupations. Mamman Shata specifically composed and sang a song, for northern people to partake in occupational activities. He warns them against staying idle. He says:

*Kai mai aski tsare askin na ka,
Mai tebur tsare kan teburin ka,
Mai akwaku tsare kayan ka,*

Mai noma ka tsare gonar ka.

(Gargadi ga yan Arewa Song).

Translation:

The barber should keep barbing,
The Shop keeper should take care of his shop,
Pety-trader should take care of his business,
The farmer should take care of his farm.

Shehu Ajilo, in his Waƙar Noma, says:

*Wanda baya noma, nan duniya
Ko da rikon aure zai mai wuya*

(Shehu Ajilo in *Wakar Noma* Song).

Translation:

Who is not farming in this world,
Cannot take care of family.

In his Bakandamiya, Ibrahim Narambada presents very good points about Hausa occupations where he says:

*Ai kyau mafarauci ya dau kare ya kiyayo yah hi
Shi dan Mallam ya kama littafe ad dai dai
Sai zuba waka nikai kama da ta Alfa zazi
Yanzu kul mai gona yana bidat aukin noma nai.*

Translation:

What is best for a hunter is to hunt around,
And, the son of the teacher should read a book that is right,
I keep singing like *Alfa Zazi*.
Now that the farmer is harvesting for his farm products.

He adds that, through his chorus,

*Shi kau dan Arne ya kama noma daidai an nan
A sai mai Kwando ya barbade taki ad dai dai.*

Translation:

The farmer should take farming, that is right,
He should spray the fertiliser, that is right.

There are some entertainment occupations among the Hausa like boxing which Mamman Shata has a song for.

Conclusion

The paper has examined some Hausa Oral Songs that portray the trading, economic and occupational activities of the Hausa which include blacksmithing, building, weaving, trading,

hunting, teaching, music, fishing, dyeing, tannery, cobblery, barbing and the most dominant occupation, farming. It has been proved that the Hausa are not detached from their verbal art. This is why their oral songs and economic/occupational activities remain inseparable. The songs can serve as a guiding compass to a curious or inquisitive mind in knowing the economic and occupational activities of the Hausa people. However, it is important to know that the interpretation of the songs is not exhaustive because of the scope of the paper. Hence, they can carry other meanings to put other situations since the same songs can be interpreted differently depending on the situation, context or even the audience.

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