CHAPTER ONE

HAUSA IDENTITY:
LANGUAGE, HISTORY AND RELIGION

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1. Introduction

Today, perhaps 25 million Hausa-speakers live in northern Nigeria and southern Niger (Map 1.1.), while a further 15 million people throughout West Africa speak Hausa as a second language. For at least five hundred years, observers have marvelled at the wide-ranging trade networks, links to the Islamic world, and imposing walled towns of the society we now know as Hausa. In spite of this prominence, Hausa history remains disputed. In particular, there is little agreement on the mechanisms by which developed complex social and settlement hierarchies, Islamic institutions, and links with the wider world, which have come to characterise ‘Hausa’ in the eye of outsiders.

The evolution of a Hausa socio-political organisation has generated considerable scholarly discussion for at least two hundred years. Generally speaking, early debates are now censured for their uncritical acceptance of oral and written records, while the 1970s and 1980s saw a shift in scholarly focus towards a more sceptical approach, integrating what data were becoming available from historical linguistics and

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1 We are grateful to William Clarence-Smith (School of Oriental and African Studies, London), Ibrahim Hamza (University of York, Canada), Dierk Lange (University of Bayreuth), Murray Last (University College London), Robin Law (University of Stirling), Paul Lovejoy (University of York, Canada), and John Sutton (University of Oxford) for comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

2 Source: SIL International; http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=hau (link checked 8 December 2009). Jaggar, this volume, places the number of speakers of Hausa as a first language even higher, perhaps as many as 40 million.

3 Taking the writings of Mohammed Bello (reproduced in Denham et al. [1828: II: Appendix, no. XII] and Arnett [1922]) and Cooley (1841) as a starting point.
On the whole, demands for greater exegetic rigour have been paralleled by a generalised call for reflexivity in the social sciences and the humanities; indeed, the historiography of Hausa studies reflects wider developments in African studies. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the long-standing debate regarding the relative influence of external versus internal processes. Africanist researchers have now rejected the racist ideological underpinnings of the so-called ‘Hamitic hypothesis’ which, as Sanders (1969: 521) succinctly put it, held that ‘everything of value ever found in Africa was brought there by the Hamites, allegedly a branch of the Caucasian race’. This belief was often paralleled in oral traditions involving the coming of strangers from afar and bringing a new form of political or social organisation. In the Hausa case, the two main sources dealing with early history, the Daura Chronicle (also known as the ‘Bayajidda legend’) and the Kano Chronicle, involve the arrival of immigrants and their assimilation, through war or marriage, of the local peoples. Thus early, reconstructions of Hausa history were informed to varying degrees by the idea that both the ‘Hausa’ group and its political organisation resulted from the intermarriage of Hausa women with incoming Berbers. Indeed, Heinrich Barth, one of the first European visitors to meet the new Fulani rulers of the Hausa area after the jihad of the mid-nineteenth century, was surprised to find that the ruling class was in fact not physically distinct from the subject population (Usman 1982–1985).

Approaches more critical to the written evidence, as well as archaeological documentation of African innovation independent of outside stimuli, have challenged such interpretations relying wholly on external influences. As models based on migration theories have correspondingly been revised, greater emphasis has been placed on endogenous