

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE HAUSA TEXTILE INDUSTRY: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PRECOLONIAL PERIOD

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1. *Introduction*

Textiles are finished products which represent not only the material resources of an area but also the culture of a people. In Hausaland, cloth had many functions; for centuries it was used for clothing, to transfer wealth, as a medium of exchange, as tribute, as an item in religious and burial rituals and as a symbol of differences in religious, economic, political, ethnic and social status. The symbolic functions of cloth were as important as the practical ones and influenced the demand for textiles.

Different uses required different kinds of cloth, which varied according to size, quality, colour and durability; this led to significant product differentiation and economic specialisation. This helps to explain the development of the textile trade. Cloth-producing areas frequently imported different kinds of cloth from other producing areas. Different techniques of weaving, dyeing and tailoring in various areas contributed to the complex pattern of trading relations within the separate Hausa areas, as well as between them and other areas beyond Hausaland. The manufacture of textiles was not just the prerogative of a few specialised artisans, but involved the whole population scattered throughout the territory. Textiles were produced in both urban and rural areas and, although clothing was a symbol of religious and social identity, the making and trading of cloth in Hausaland was the expression of a culture that tended to integrate different strata of the population regardless of ethnic identity.

This complex pattern of trade and manufacturing developed over many centuries and was closely connected to the flow of events and historical circumstances. Textile production was not characterised by a uniform development but by different phases, reflecting the political

and economic changes that took place in the region. The nineteenth century saw an unprecedented growth in the Hausa textile industry, a growth that was not limited to a few cities, as in the past, but extended to all the Hausa territories; its main causes are still a matter for discussion. Moreover, not much is known about the origins and development of the Hausa textile industry before the nineteenth century. Most of the existing literature has focused on the period just before and after colonisation, at the beginning of the twentieth century, analysing the artistic and technical aspects of cloth; only a few pioneering studies have explored textile trade and manufacturing (cf. Shea 1974, 1975, 1983; Johnson 1973, 1976, 1977, 1978).

The aim of this chapter is to identify the main characteristics of the Hausa textile industry, exploring its origins, development and main distinguishing economic features in the precolonial period. A focus on the history of cotton growing and textile manufacturing allows us to study the evolution of Hausa material culture from the perspective of the interrelationship between rural and urban areas.¹ Finally, this chapter aims to contribute to the debate on the distinctive characteristics of what Adamu (1978) calls the 'Hausa factor', which can be primarily identified as the potential capacity to integrate foreigners into the Hausa network of trade and production and its system of recruiting and organising labour on a pluralistic ethnic basis.

2. *Cloth and Muslim traders before the nineteenth century*

The origin and spread of clothing and trade

Written sources are almost silent on the manufacturing of cloth in the Hausa-speaking area before the nineteenth century. They testify to the use and spread of clothing among the different peoples in this area and the opportunity for trading in cloth by foreign merchants. However, looking at these aspects helps to identify the origins of a culture that led to the development of the Hausa textile industry. It is clear that the use of clothing accompanied the spread of Islam and the rise of an urban culture mainly influenced by the beginning of a network linked to trans-Saharan trade and the establishment of Muslim merchants

¹ Unfortunately, it remains unclear when cotton was first used generally in West Africa (see Kriger 2006: 26, 73–76).