

Empowering Tradition, Enriching the Future: Reviving Hausa Traditional Hand Embroidery for Nigeria's Economic Renaissance

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07036172339,

DOI: [10.56201/rjhcs.v11.no3.2025.pg78.83](https://doi.org/10.56201/rjhcs.v11.no3.2025.pg78.83)

Abstract

This position paper examines the revitalization of Hausa traditional hand embroidery as a catalyst for Nigeria's economic renaissance. It delves into the cultural importance of this craft, highlighting its role in preserving the rich heritage and identity of the Hausa people. The paper argues that by empowering artisans, particularly women and marginalized communities, the revival of this tradition can generate significant economic benefits. It addresses the challenges faced in this endeavor, such as the decline in skills and limited market access, and proposes strategies including skill development, market expansion, and infrastructure support. The paper advocates for a balanced approach that retains the authenticity of Hausa embroidery while adapting it to contemporary demands, thus creating a sustainable future where cultural preservation and economic growth are intertwined.

Keywords: *Empowering Tradition. Hausa traditional Embroidery and Economic Renaissance*

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation rich in cultural diversity, with each ethnic group contributing uniquely to the country's heritage. Among these, the Hausa people are renowned for their traditional hand embroidery, a craft that has been passed down through generations. This embroidery is more than just an artistic expression; it is a cultural narrative, a symbol of identity, and a source of livelihood for many. Embroidery according to Abdullahi (2024), is an interesting stitching technique by which coloured threads, generally of silk or wool are used with a special needle to make a variety of stitches, and it is used to make an attractive design on garment, wall hanging or upholstery pieces. Banjoko (2009) explains that, the embroidery design is used on nearly all their garments. That is, from Hausa farmers' clothes to riding robes and ceremonial apparel. Maiwada and Renne (2007) state that, ...in Zaria, the production of extensively *Babbanriga* was primarily through commission by local wealthy patrons of royal class. Fine embroidered robes were not generally available in the market, although some robes were given as gifts and the long-distance trade of robes did exist.

The art of embroidery is dominantly practised in Nigeria by the Hausa in the North and the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria. Agu (2007) opines that, dignity and power have been attached to various embroidery works worn by the Emirs and the Oba. The practice of embroidery provides many Nigerians with means of livelihood in various aspects that have to do with preparation of yarn dyeing, drawing of designs; embroidery and merchandising of the products, all of which have been sustaining the crafts.

The development of traditional hand embroidery has taken on a new significance among the current dislocation of the world economy. Olowoake (2016) asserts that, the novel world economic structure presently underlines the importance of small, labor-intensive industries, such as handmade embroidery develops economically less developed countries. Economic values of the traditional African society are marked by cooperation. The traditional economy, which is mainly based on crafts, was co-operative in nature. In Hausa land, for instance, embroidery business is assisted by friends and relatives not because they will be paid but, in order to acquire saleable skills. Children were seen to provide the main labour force (Abdullahi, 2024).

Hence, it can be stated without fear of contradiction that, the economic values of the traditional African society were founded on hard work and cooperation. Having looked at some of the values that characterize the African culture, it is important to state here that, such values are inextricably bound together, and are to be comprehended in their totality as African cultural values. The embroidery as a trade, helps the individuals in terms of income generation by all means possible.

However, like many traditional crafts, Garba (2020) stated that, Hausa hand embroidery is at risk of being overshadowed by modernization and mass production. This paper explores the potential of reviving Hausa traditional hand embroidery as a means to empower communities, enrich cultural heritage, and drive Nigeria's economic renaissance.

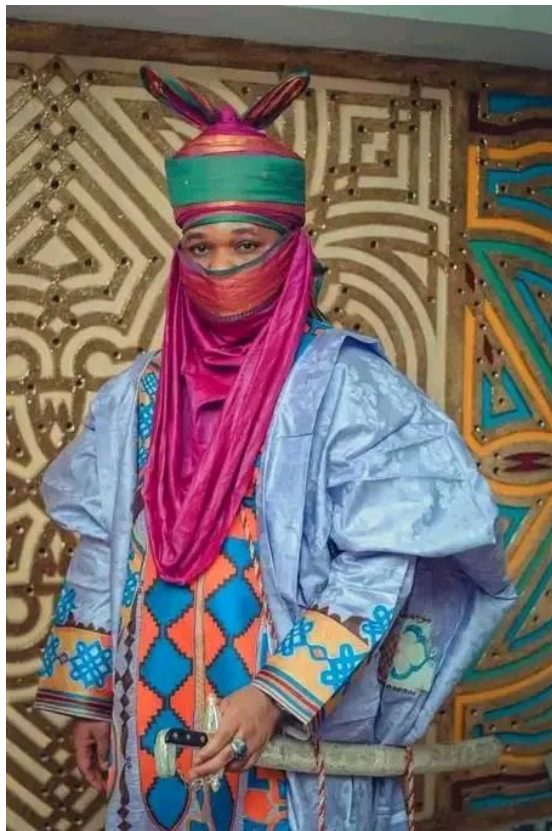


Plate 1: Samples of Hand Embroidery
Source: Mustapha H. (2023)

The Cultural Significance of Hausa Hand Embroidery

Culture is to be understood as the way of life of a people. This presupposes the fact that, there can be no people without a culture. Etuk (2002) says to claim that there is no society without a culture would, by implication, mean that such a society has continued to survive without any form of social organization or institutions, norms, beliefs and taboos, and so on. Ibrahim (2022), opined that, Culture has been classified into its material and non-material aspects. While material culture refers to the visible tactile objects which man is able to manufacture for the purposes of human survival; non-material culture comprises of the norms and morals of the people. While material culture is concrete and takes the form of artifacts and crafts, non-material culture is abstract but has a very pervasive influence on the lives of the people of a particular culture.

Hausa hand embroidery known as *dinkin hannu*, is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Hausa society. It serves not only as a form of aesthetic expression but also as a symbol of identity, social status and heritage. Embroidery garments like the *babbar riga* (a flowing gown by men) are worn during important ceremonies such as weddings, naming rituals, religious festivals. The quality, complexity and intricacy of the embroidery often reflect the social rank of the wearer, with more elaborate designs indicating higher status (Rene, 2002). These garments are visual statements of prestige and authority, making them essential cultural assets in Hausa society.

Moreover, Hausa embroidery is a powerful medium for cultural expression and storytelling. The motifs and patterns used in the embroidery often carry symbolic meanings rooted in Hausa traditions and values. For instance, geometric shapes and repeating patterns are not chosen at random but are imbued with cultural narratives or references to historical events (Aremu, 2024). Through embroidery, artisans communicate complex ideas and maintain oral histories, effectively transforming cloth into a visual language that spans generations.

Religious influence, particularly Islam, also plays a crucial role in shaping Hausa embroidery designs. Tanimu and Srivastava (2025) noted that Islam is the dominant religion among the Hausa, many patterns reflect Islamic aesthetics, favoring symmetry, repetition and abstraction in accordance with Islamic art principle. Additionally, the act of embroidery itself is often seen as a meditative process that allows for spiritual reflection, further integrating religious devotion with artisanal work.

Economic Potential of Reviving Hausa Hand Embroidery

Beyond its cultural value, Hausa traditional hand embroidery holds immense economic potential. The global market is increasingly valuing authentic, handmade, and culturally significant products. In this context, Hausa embroidery can be positioned as a luxury or bespoke product, appealing to both local and international markets (Abdullahi, 2024).

Reviving Hausa hand embroidery designs presents a powerful opportunity for economic development, particularly in northern Nigeria where the craft has historical roots. As a labor-intensive and skill-based art, hand embroidery can generate employment for a wide segment of the population, especially for women and youth in rural areas. According to Renne (2002), Hausa hand embroidery has historically supported local economies by providing income-generating activities within households. In places like Zaria, women have leveraged embroidery not only as cultural practice but also as a means of livelihood, often working from home in accordance with cultural norms. These activities contribute to financial inclusion and social empowerment, particularly when structured through cooperatives or women-led enterprise (Akwa urnal of Fine ad applied

Arts, 2023). Furthermore, embroidery production does not require expensive machinery, making it an accessible microenterprise for economically marginalized groups.

In addition to job creation, reviving Hausa embroidery can boost Nigeria's fashion and cultural tourism sectors. Traditional garments like the *babbar riga*, adorned with elaborate hand-stitched motifs, are sought after both locally and global African diaspora (Tanimu and Srivastava, 2025). With rising interest in sustainable and ethically made fashion, hand embroidery aligns with global market trends favoring handcrafted, culturally authentic products.

Moreover, the promotion of Hausa hand embroidery could stimulate the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These enterprises could focus on the production, marketing, and export of embroidered goods, thereby creating jobs and fostering economic growth. The ripple effects of such an initiative could be profound, with benefits extending to related sectors such as tourism, fashion, and retail. Thus, embroidery workshops and fashion events centered around Hausa design can attract cultural tourists and boost local economies through related services such as hospitality and transportation.

Challenges to Revival of Hausa Traditional Hand Embroidery

Despite its potential, the revival of Hausa traditional hand embroidery faces several challenges. The most significant is the erosion of skills and knowledge as younger generations move away from traditional crafts in search of modern occupations. This shift is exacerbated by the lack of formal training programs that focus on traditional crafts, leading to a gradual loss of expertise.

Another challenge is the limited access to markets and resources. Many artisans lack the infrastructure and support needed to scale their businesses and reach wider markets. This is compounded by the competition from mass-produced goods, which are often cheaper and more readily available, making it difficult for handmade products to compete.

Furthermore, there is the challenge of balancing tradition with innovation. While it is important to preserve the authenticity of Hausa embroidery, there is also a need to adapt designs and techniques to meet contemporary tastes and demands. This requires a careful balance to ensure that the craft remains relevant and appealing without losing its cultural essence.

Strategies for Revitalization

To successfully revive Hausa traditional hand embroidery, a comprehensive and coordinated approach is required. The following strategies can help achieve this goal:

1. Skill Development and Education

Establishing vocational training programs and workshops that focus on teaching traditional embroidery techniques to younger generations is crucial. These programs could be integrated into educational curricula or offered as community-based initiatives. Collaboration with local artisans, cultural organizations, and educational institutions could help ensure the transmission of skills and knowledge.

2. Market Access and Promotion Creating platforms that connect artisans with local, national, and international markets is essential. E-commerce platforms, craft fairs, and collaborations with fashion designers and retailers could provide artisans with the exposure and customer base they need to succeed. Additionally, marketing campaigns that highlight the cultural significance and uniqueness of Hausa embroidery could help generate demand for these products.

3. Supportive Infrastructure:

Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should invest in the infrastructure needed to support the production and distribution of embroidered goods. This includes access to quality materials, tools, and workspace, as well as logistical support for exporting products. Financial assistance in the form of grants or microloans could also help artisans grow their businesses.

4. Cultural Promotion Awareness

Raising awareness about the cultural significance of Hausa traditional hand embroidery is crucial for its revival. This can be achieved through cultural campaigns, exhibitions, and collaborations with the fashion and tourism industries. By promoting the cultural heritage associated with this craft, we can generate pride and interest in its preservation.

5. Innovation

Encouraging artisans to experiment with new designs, materials, and techniques can help ensure that Hausa hand embroidery remains relevant in contemporary markets. Design schools, fashion institutes, and art collectives can collaborate with artisans to create products that blend tradition with modern aesthetics. This approach allows for innovation while preserving the core elements of the craft.

Conclusion

Reviving Hausa traditional hand embroidery represents a powerful opportunity to empower communities, enrich Nigeria's cultural heritage, and drive economic growth. By investing in the preservation and promotion of this craft, we can create a future where cultural heritage and economic development are intertwined, where artisans are empowered to earn a livelihood from their skills, and where traditional craftsmanship is celebrated and cherished. The renaissance of Hausa hand embroidery is not just a return to the past; it is a step towards a future where tradition and modernity coexist, enriching the lives of all Nigerians.

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