

Being and Becoming Hausa is not straightforward— clothing, religion, the countryside and pots all play a part



The Hausa comprise 24 million people living in Niger and Nigeria as well as 15 million people spread throughout West Africa who speak Hausa as a second language. From the 15th century onwards, outsiders, including Europeans, have been impressed by the Hausa's vast town walls, extensive trade links and manufacturing. But what is it to be Hausa? This is the question addressed by Anne Haour and Benedetta Rossi, funded by the [Religion and Society Programme](#), who brought together anthropologists, archaeologists, economists, linguists and museologists from Africa, Europe and North America to address this issue in two expert workshops in 2008. Their answer uncovers the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of Hausa identity, in which religion plays an important part, but in which there remains considerable variety, tolerance, and flexibility. The project concludes that there are many 'ways of life' which can be identified as Hausa.

The rural origins of Hausa identity are important, and Hausa productive capacity in the countryside enabled the most renowned walled Islamic Hausa towns to come into existence. Although early Hausa society included a strong animist component, Islam played an increasing role to the point where today being Hausa is often associated with being Muslim. Yet animist rituals and beliefs persist, and some Hausa converted to Christianity. One thing which became apparent through the workshops was the centuries-long tradition of tolerance and respect, which belies many media representations of West Africa.

Material culture is another aspect fundamental to the definition of 'Hausaness' and the network found that this can be approached from many different disciplinary perspectives. Clothing is one important marker of identity, ceramics are another. Different forms of material culture have always been impacted by foreign influences, and the project discussed the tangible evidence for such an impact, including changes in ceramic decoration.

Workshop participants came from Niger, Nigeria, the USA, Germany, Italy, Sweden and France, as well as across the UK. The meeting in Liverpool included a chance to study the collections of the World Museum Liverpool and Dr A. Mahamane (University of Niamey, Niger) then gave a seminar at the Centre for the Study of International Slavery (CSIS) on 'Contemporary Slavery in Niger'. Out of the workshops developed a dedicated mailing list which has enabled at least 150 scholars worldwide to become engaged with the research. Extra funding was attracted from the Sainsbury Research Unit, African Studies Association UK and CSIS. The network has led to a landmark publication in Hausa studies featuring papers by participants entitled *Being and Becoming Hausa* published by Brill in 2010, which has become the fourth bestselling volume in their African Social Studies series.

Find out more...

- Visit the network's website where you can see the full list of workshop participants: http://www.liv.ac.uk/history/research/Hausa_identity/
- Look up the book published from the network *Being and Becoming Hausa: Interdisciplinary* by Brill in 2010: <http://www.brill.nl/default.aspx?partid=210&pid=41673>
- Contact Anne Haour (A.Haour@uea.ac.uk) or Benedetta Rossi (B.rossi@bham.ac.uk).
- Read pieces about the project Anne Haour wrote for the October 2008 edition of the University of East Anglia newsletter *Broadview*: http://www.uea.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.99577!bv_oct08_art.pdf (p14) and the African Studies Association UK newsletter (pp9-10): http://www.asauk.net/downloads/newsletters/08/asauknews_oct08.pdf.
- Sign up to the network's mailing list: hausanetwork@googlemail.com
- Follow Anne Haour's blog, where among other research questions she follows up with schoolchildren in Norwich, UK, the problem of negative media representations of West Africa. <http://crossroadsofempires.wordpress.com/2012/06/07/depicting-africa/>

You might also be interested in...

- The Religion and Society funded project which looked at gender, violence and religion in Kaduna, Nigeria run by Colette Harris who is also based at the University of East Anglia: <http://www.uea.ac.uk/dev/kaduna>
- John Mack's Religion and Society funded research into 'Belief and Belonging', Christianity, Islam and identity in Northern Kenya: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/projects/phase_one/small_research_projects/page:2
- The Sainsbury Research Unit where Anne Haour is based (alongside John Mack): <http://www.sru.uea.ac.uk/>
- The Centre for the Study of International Slavery Liverpool: <http://www.liv.ac.uk/csis/>
- The World Museum Liverpool: <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/visit/>
- The African Studies Association of the UK: <http://www.asauk.net/>

Project Details

Award Title

The emergence of Hausa identity: religion and history

Team

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University

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Award Type

Phase 1 Network

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Hausa, Nigeria, Niger, West Africa, clothing, ceramics, ethnicity, Islam, material culture