



WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY IN PRE- COLONIAL KANO

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Abstract

The pre-colonial era in African history was marked by the flourishing of indigenous economies and societies, with Kano as the prominent commercial city in the Hausa kingdom. Scholars have extensively explored the political and cultural dynamics of pre-colonial Kano. The economic contributions of women have being overlooked. This omission perpetuates a distorted understanding of the role women played towards the growth of the economy in pre-colonial Kano, obscuring the vital roles women played in shaping its prosperity. Therefore this paper explores the crucial role women played in the economic development of pre- colonial Kano. It glances into the strategic stages of Kano's formation and transformation. The paper move on highlighting the potential influence of Uthman Dan Fodio's jihad movement on expanding women's economic opportunities, through a sound position based on the commandments of Allah and his prophet. The focus then shifts to Kano's economic landscape, highlighting the diverse contributions of women in various sectors like agriculture, textile, and market management. The paper examines their activities in agricultural processing, dyeing, embroidery, and market administration, analyzing how their hard work fueled Kano's economic success. It also explores how these women actively participated in these processes and retail their product within the confine of their homes. The neglect of women economic contributions in pre-colonial Kano has led to an incomplete understanding of the city's economic history, obscuring the vital roles women played in its growth and prosperity. This paper seeks to highlight the diverse contributions of women in various sectors as mention above and analyze how their activities fuelled Kano's economic success specifically examining the strategic stages of Kano's formation and transformation and finally analyze on how women's economic activities contributed to Kano's prosperity.

Keywords

Pre- Colonial Kano, Economy, Women activities

Introduction

Kano occupies the area between latitude 10° 30'N and 13°N and longitude 7° 40'E and 10° 35'E.ⁱ Its political history could be traced back to Barbushe who, according to Kano Chronicle, brought together several clans around the settlement of Dala under a single religion- political authority. Bagauda made it a centralized polity in 999 AD. This led to the development of Kano into a city state with walls constructed to guard its sanctity and provide security between the 11th and 13th centuries. By 14th and 15th centuries, Kano had developed into a kingdom after conquering villages and town within its vicinity.ⁱⁱ In the 19th century, Kano and other Hausa states were brought under a theocratic state called the Sokoto Caliphate, courtesy of the jihad movement in the 19th century by Usman Dan Fodio.ⁱⁱⁱ The jihad leader, Sheikh Uthman dan Fodio, expressed concern that women weren't receiving the full religious education they deserved. He believed Islamic teachings required women to understand their religious duties, like prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage (Hajj). He even felt they should be knowledgeable about matters related to trade and business transactions.^{iv}

The Jihad, which extended up to 1810, further opened up Hausaland to more migrants, established the supremacy of Islam, gave more rights to women and conveyed the impression of great economic transformation.^v The political stability attained by Kano during this period of state formation aided by its strategic location in Central Sudan made it to attract settlers from within to as far as the Upper Benue region and Western Sudan. These contacts and the development of occupation groups led to the growth of trade, thus making it become one of the most important manufacturing and commercial cities in Hausaland. Kano served as an important trade route in all directions linking the center of industry with markets and sources of raw materials in the countryside of the West African desert, savanna, and the forest zones.^{vi} When Clapperton visited Kano in 1825, he was super impressed by the city. He admired how much trade and manufacturing was going on there. He wrote a lot about all the interesting things he saw: the markets, the people who lived there, their customs, how the city was run, and how Kano could be a great trading partner for Britain in the future.^{vii}

The important economic activities which made Kano famous were cloth making, weaving and the dyeing industry. Barth's visit between 1849-1855 described how articles, such as sandals, were produced from tanned goat skins and exported to far

destinations in Sudan. And C.H Robinson's visit in 1890 reviewed the size and importance of the cotton industry in Kano throughout the 19th century. A part from the industries, which provided the main basis of its commerce, Kano was the major distribution Centre for imports into Hausa land.^{viii} It is important to note that the convergence of various trade routes in Kano facilitated the development of its commercial activities and the expansion of its craft industries in the nineteenth century, such a development was what made the most important trading center in the whole of Western and Central Sudan.^{ix} It is not the market alone that made Kano wealthy, but also its manufacturing capacity in cotton, cloth and leather.^x Since the sixteenth century, the basic market pattern that developed in Kano involved the use of currency, which included cloth and salt, metal goods, such as arrow heads or knives, along with slaves and horses for a larger value. By the 18th century cowry shells were currency as well.^{xi}

The Role of Women In The Pre-Colonial Economy of Kano

Since time immemorial, women have played vital roles in pre-colonial Nigerian societies, engaging proficiently in the economies of the different kingdoms, towns, and villages, women in pre-colonial Nigeria were not only farmers but also traders, potters, weavers, milliners, healthcare providers, singers, dancers, diviners, priestesses, and spiritual healers. For example, in the northern part of Nigeria, in the area encompassing the present-day Sokoto State (formerly the Sokoto Caliphate), women significantly contributed to the flourishing textile industry of the time.^{xii} Pre-colonial societies relied heavily on the household as the foundational unit for both social and economic organization. A pre-colonial household encompassed a single dwelling or compound led by a recognized head, typically a male figure acting as husband and father. This unit included his wife/wives and all dependent children residing there until they achieved independence. This structure highlights the extended nature of the household, encompassing more than just the nuclear family. Crucially, the household functioned as a **corporate body**, indicating a unified entity with shared resources and responsibilities. This collective approach ensured the economic and social well-being of all members. A "family" could encompass several households, potentially lacking a formally designated head. This departs from the modern nuclear family structure, emphasizing a more interconnected and dispersed kinship network.

Members within the household operated collaboratively under the supervision of the head. This individual held the primary responsibility for the welfare of all dependents, ensuring their physical and social needs were met.^{xiii}

Hausa women had long carried out income earning occupations. Their economic participation and their contribution to social development in pre - colonial Kano society cannot be over emphasized.^{xiv} The economy of Hausaland as described by Ferguson was said to have centered on agriculture.^{xv} In Kano, about 80% of the population depended largely on farming and other agricultural activities. It served not only as a source of food, but also as its major source of income. Grains cultivated included millet, sorghum, beans, maize, groundnuts, rice and many more.^{xvi} While crops such as onions, pepper, tobacco and other produce supplemented grains as important export commodities. Grains were mostly sold to Tuaregs who, in turn, imported salt from the desert. While dried onion leaves, peppers and tobacco were shipped in all directions from the caliphate, so also cotton, indigo, cassava and sugar - cane added to the wealth of agricultural commodities which made the 19th century Hausa economy one of the most developed in pre-colonial Africa.^{xvii}

Hausa women participated in the field of agricultural processing since time immemorial. they participated in planting seeds (*Shuka*) and harvesting of crops (*Girbi*) and crop processing before and during consumption.^{xviii} Women were also in another agricultural activities such as threshing (*Sissika*), winnowing grains (*Sirfe*) and (*Shika*) to prepare the products for either marketing or consumption. They engaged in all these activities for paid labour or house use.^{xix} For instance, a woman specializing in cleaning grains (*Tattara*) might be called to a client's house. The grains would be brought out to her and upon completion, she would receive a wage and potentially a portion of the processed grains for personal use. This example highlights the multifaceted nature of women's economic activities, extending beyond farm fields to specialized processing within the domestic sphere. At harvest period, some women send their husbands with money to purchase grains for storage in granaries, so that by the end of the dry season when there is high demand they would release the grains out to the market.^{xx} Groundnuts served as an important cash crop, which plays a vital role in the Hausa economy. Women processed it to make different things, such as groundnut oil (*Mangyada*), fried groundnut cakes (*Kuli- kuli, Tunkuz*), fried groundnut (*Gyada marau-marau*) and boiled groundnut (*Gyada tibis*). Local tools used in the production process include grinding stone (*Dutsen nika*), mortar (*Tirmi*) and other items.^{xxi} In Hausa land, women involvement in trade was mostly restricted within the spheres of items that could be carried out domestically and required no male participation.^{xxii} According to Hill, Hausa women especially farmers and traders wives that engaged in seclusion are called *Kwarami* These women retail large quantity of grains to other women on behalf of their husband. The *Yan Kwarami* women engaged together with their children in channeling their product which Hill termed as "A honey comb market."^{xxiii}

Another aspect of agricultural processing is food processing, which involves the transformation of raw agricultural products into consumable food products. In Kano, some wives of local traders, especially around the vicinity of market places, engaged in trading mainly on meals and snacks, among other things. Two thirds of them were house traders who mainly cooked and processed food stuffs.^{xxiv} However, apart from their engagement in domestic duties, these same women were involved in preparation of food for sale, which was usually traded by their young male and female children. During these periods, women residing both in villages and towns engaged in various types of food making, such as traditional hausa foods (*Tuwan dawa, Tuwan masara, Tuwan gero, Shikafar hausa, Kosai, Danwake, Wainar Rogo, Achama, Matsatsafa Tubani, Kunu, Fura and Koko,*

which were mainly placed in calabash (*Kwarya*), small calabash (*Koko*) and a wooden food bowl (*Akushi*). And local snacks like *Dubulan*, *Nakiya*, *Alkaki* and *Masa*. Whenever the foods are ready then they would be taken to market or *dandali* for people to buy.^{xxv} Some girls moved around hawking food from house to house with baskets on their head.^{xxvi} Women combined domestic labour together with income earning occupations. Women traders generally provide food directly to their families for consumption, thereby reducing the burden on their husbands.^{xxvii} Pounding millet balls (*fura*) was another agricultural processing participated by some women.^{xxviii} Hand grinding trade (*Nikau*) was normally done in Kano by some women, especially from villages. They came into the city to participate more in this activity and would be paid for their labour. They grind grains for (*tuwo*, *fura*) and groundnut oil. The Preparation of locust beans (*Daddawa*) was also another form of business done by women. (*Daddawa*) is made from locust.^{xxix}

However, in the 19th century Kano, the dyeing industry was an integral part of the textile sector. Artisans in the dyeing industry used natural dyes like indigo. Therefore indigo dyeing centers (*Karofi*) existed in the Kano Emirate, such as *Karofin Kofar Mata*, *Karofin Zage*, *Karofin Dala*, *Karofin Kwalwa*, *Karofin Sheshe*, *Karofin Wanka da Shuni*, *Karofin Sudawa*, *Karofin Bakin ruwa* and *Karofin Kul-kul*. As a result of the presence of these pit centers, dyeing was practiced in these places because it frequently served local needs. They dyed occasional cloths for the townspeople; re-dyed old cloths and dyed small quantities of threads for the weavers in the neighborhood.^{xxx} These fabrics were woven and dyed in various patterns and designs, reflecting the rich cultural heritage of the Hausa people. The dyed fabrics were highly prized during the trans Saharan trade, with merchants from across the desert exchanging goods like salt, gold and ivory for these vibrant textiles. Women tied materials to be dyed in their homes in different pattern and designs, for the dyers and specialist construction workers made the dye-pits. Such dyed patterns were of different designs such as three basket (*Mai kwando uku*), Emirs place (*Mai fada sarki*), zebra or (*Mai carbi Jaki ya sha wuta*), widow's eye or (*Idan bazawara*) and many more. A huge amount of cloths would be brought to a woman for tying while she resided at home. The dyers were the ones to give these women designs to tie or even let them make a choice on it. And they would be paid their wage when they were done. At other times, down payment (*Kafin alkalami*) was given to them. These women tied the cloths at their leisure period and immediately when they were done they would call the attention of the dyers for collection or even send their children to take them back. Most of the women who participated in tying were resident in the quarters neighbouring the dye-pit centers.^{xxxi}

In the pre-colonial Kano, the dyers of cloth and workers of dum palm fronds had a symbiotic relationship. Therefore workers of dum – palm fronds (*Kaba*) of Kano metropolis were mainly local Hausa, Kanuri, Fulbe and other people of Central Saharan origins. Both males and females, old and young were involved. *Kaba* working was one of the main professions of married women in Kano city as a result of the existence of the dying centers. Items produce with the used of *Kaba* in the 1800s are mats such as (*Shedari*, *Karaunu*, *Fafin giwa*, *Tabarma hannu*), (*Faifai*) trays hats such as *Malfuna*.^{xxxii} Weaving hand fan (*Mafici*) and broom (*Tsintsiyar kaba*). They used items such as frond, shrub and dyeing materials (*Kaba*, *Zamarke* and *Kayan tiri*) and other local colours such as (*Zabibi*, *Algasa*, *Shuni* and *Garura*), which are used in making beautiful designs and a small knife for cutting the frond (*Kaba*). A fast and expert woman could weave up to 20 *Mafici* per day or 5 mats depending on their sizes. And the remains of the *Kaba* was used in making brooms. A woman could engage in weaving her hand fan and mat while jesting together with family and friends around her until she is done. While she resided in her house, people around her would come in need of the products, some might be for house need and others to export to such towns like Lagos.^{xxxiii} Hand embroidery is an essential part of textile industry in Kano; it is a significant aspect of the emirate rich cultural heritage. Kano was famous for its intricate embroidery styles, which are used to adorn traditional clothing such as *kaftan*, *Babba riga*. There were also tailors who engaged in hand embroidery (*Dinkin hannu*) in various quarters of Kano city, which include Yalwa, Durmin Arbabi, Masukwani, Kul-kul, Marmara, Soron dinki e.t.c. They produced garments with a distinctive tradition of tailoring known as the Eastern style (*Dinkin gabas*), and those taught old style (*Dinkin gargajiya*) tailoring designs.^{xxxiv} Women tailors made beautiful hand embroideries (*Dinkin hannu*) for men on their clothes by using thread and needle to make the designs, such as (*Dagi*, *kwado*, *Adan kwadina*, *Kutu*, *Aninai*). It took a woman between five to ten days to finish a set of clothes, depending on the design. And when she finished the sewing she ironed the clothes by using local iron (*Dutsen guga*) and folding it in a paper before delivery.^{xxxv} Also an embroidered type of cap of different designs known as (*Zanna bukar*) was commonly made by women in this period. Such designs include (*Yar huji*, *Yar jigawa*, *Kafar ladi*, *Mai reza*, *Kafar kardi*, *Mai masallaci*) e.t.c. In almost all the wards of the city, one found women cap-makers.^{xxxvi} There were also ward based specializations. For example, Yalwa women were known for a design called inside - seam sewing (*Sab'iya*).^{xxxvii} Large numbers of caps were sold by women to city-based cap dealers as well as to private customers. What made such business attractive to women was that the cost of raw materials was low, being handmade and the caps required no expensive equipment in their production.^{xxxviii} Caps were booked frequently by different people.^{xxxix}

Women in Kano have a long history of regulating markets and acting as officials. These women, like the "Korama" who oversaw grain in the pre-colonial Kurmi market, played a vital role in ensuring smooth commerce. They acted as guides, settled disputes, and even helped determine fair prices.^{xl} *Kurmi* market evidently had a complex market economy and had been operating for hundreds of years. This market served as important sectors of the economy.^{xli} This market was in existence before colonial rule. In the 19th century, various European travelers, such as Clapperton, Heinrich Barth, Paul Staudingar and Robinson, visited Kano and were able to record information about this market. Clapperton, who believed that there was not any market in Africa, agreed that Kurmi Market was an exception based on his visit experience.^{xlii} This great market served as a center where different articles

of trade could be found for both wholesale and retail. Varieties of items such as cooking pots, looms, razors, mortars and beds among others were found. ^{xliiii}Ear rings (*Dankune*), necklace (*Dutsen wuya*), waist beads (*Jigida*), red powder (*Jar hoda*), white powder (*Yadilan, fara hoda*), eye liner (*kwali*) and many more peddling small wares (*kayan koli*) were some of the wares in the market. Young and old women used to visit this market from their towns and villages in order to purchase all these accessories for both personal use and retail purposes. These women were called vendors of peddling small wares (*Masu saida kayan koli*).^{xliiv} Barth in his visit analyses the European goods on sale at Kurmi market such as calicoes, cotton prints from Manchester, silks and sugar from France, beads from Vienna and Trieste, common paper, looking glasses, needles and small ware from Nuremberg, sword – blades from Solingren and other sundry items.^{xliv} This market possesses a distinct section dedicated to female commerce, demonstrably predating both the incursion of colonial traders and the conquest of Kano in 1903. This southeastern quadrant of the market has served as a persistent locus of female entrepreneurial activity for centuries. The Fulani women, in particular, establish a prominent presence within this space, engaging in the trade of cow dung, a historically valuable commodity. Furthermore, the section presents a diversified array of goods catering specifically to the requirements of textile production and traditional beautification practices. Raw cotton and loosely spun cotton thread cater to the needs of weavers and embroiderers, while henna (*lalle*), locust bean cake (*daddawa*), and even tobacco blossoms utilized for teeth staining are all encompassed within the offerings of this women-centric marketplace.^{xlvi}

Conclusion

This study has unveiled the significant economic aspect of women in pre-colonial Kano, challenging the prevailing narratives that marginalized their contribution. This research has demonstrated that women played a vital role in shaping the city's prosperity through engaging in diverse economic pursuits and exercising considerable control over resources and markets. The research has showed that women of the pre-colonial Kano were far from passive participants in the city's economic life rather played a vital role to the city's economic prosperity. Their roles transcended mere participation, encompassing a diverse range of activities within the agricultural, textile, and marketplace sectors. From cultivating and processing crops to transforming raw materials into coveted finished goods, their expertise demonstrably influenced every stage of the economic chain. By centering the economic history, this research has not only restored their agency but also enriched our understanding of the complex dynamics that underpinned the city's economic success. In conclusion, this study testifies to the enduring legacy of women's economic engagement in pre-colonial Kano, offering valuable insights for contemporary initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and economic development in Africa. By illuminating the past, this research aims to inform the present and shape a more equitable future for women in Kano, Africa and beyond.

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