

**Queen Amina Embroidery:  
A Hausa Women's Hand-Embroidery in Zaria City**

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**Abstract**

The Hausa people of Northern Nigeria are renowned for their production of voluminous robes known as *babban riga*, which are hand-embroidered and now also machine-embroidered on cotton damask fabrics. In the town of Zaria in Northern Nigeria, robe embroidery was primarily done by men until the 1970s, when women began to take up hand embroidery work, mainly of robes. In 1994, Hassana Yusuf and Elisha Renne, who were conducting research in Zaria City, the old, walled section of Zaria, met with several excellent women hand-embroiderers who were interested in embroidering smaller pieces for sale in the US. The group was named Queen Amina Embroidery, in honour of the 16th century ruler of the Zazzau Emirate, Queen Amina. Since that time, Hassana Yusuf has managed the group through its development of different styles and new types of embroidered works. Marketed in various venues, Queen Amina Embroidery provides income and an outlet for the embroidery of Zaria City women.

**From hand-embroidered robes by men to hand-embroidered robes by women**

In the past, the hand-embroidery of robes in Zaria City reflected a distinctly gendered division of labour—men wove narrow cotton strips used for robes and also dyed, embroidered, tailored, and finished them, while the cotton used for weaving cloth strips and for embroidering robes was carded and spun by women. In 1979, Heathcote noted that hand-woven cloth was still being used in *babban riga* production in Zaria. It is also possible that some Zaria women were still spinning thread for hand-woven cloth production at that time. When Heathcote was conducting research in Zaria City in the 1970s, the embroidery of *babban riga* was considered to be men's work (Heathcote 1972).

However, it was precisely during the 1970s, during the “oil boom years” when the demand for both machine-embroidered and hand-embroidered babban riga robes grew, that a few women began to embroider—not only caps—but babban riga as well. One woman from Magajiya Quarter in Zaria City, Aishatu Aliyu, explained her experience of this change:

I started doing *dinkir hannu* thirty-three years ago [i.e., in 1972] when I married. I came to see my husband doing this work. When I saw him doing the embroidery, it impressed me. At that time, women weren't doing this work. There were some boys coming to the house doing embroidery work, I used to watch them when they were embroidering. They drew the design on a piece of material for me and I would embroider the piece of material. If my husband went out, I would look at his embroidered work and imitate it (14 July 2005, Zaria City).

There are several factors which have contributed to women's taking up the hand-embroidery of babban riga, beginning in the 1970s. With many Zaria City men moving into machine-embroidery work during the 1960s and afterwards, the continued demand for lighter-weight, hand-embroidered robes was filled by women who learned to do this work from their brothers, husbands, as well as from young boys who hand-embroidered when visiting women's homes during the 1970s and early 1980s. Women embroiderers attributed this change in babban riga production to increased demand for embroidered robes, to women's need for profitable work (substituting cap embroidery with robe embroidery) that they could do in their homes (while observing the practice of seclusion), and to the increasing inflationary pressures which forced men into more remunerative occupations such as trading, factory and office work, as well as machine-embroidery (Maiwada and Renne 2007), as several women embroiderers explained:

Before, men did the embroidery of babban riga and women did hula (caps) but the women started to change to babban riga because they weren't seeing profit from hula. Before, the work of babban riga was not much, but now the work is much—so women are doing it.

Women [embroider babban riga more now] because women are always at home, they don't go anywhere. They can't go outside so they depend on this embroidery. [And] the situation has changed, much money cannot buy many things so they [men] can't do this work and feed their families.

In the area of my parents [Anguwa Kahu], men do more hand embroidery. But in my area [Rimin Kambari], women do more, because men in my area do machine embroidery.

Since some Zaria City women saw the hand-embroidery of robes as more profitable than cap embroidery (Heathcote 1975), they took up this work as men left it. Also, with the resumption of civilian rule under President Shehu Shagari (1979–1982), the President further fostered the wearing of machine-embroidered robes by his wearing of the less elaborately machine-embroidered “Shagari style” babban riga, made with cotton damask fabrics (Kriger 1988; Perani and Wolff 1992). These robes were popular not only among northern Nigerians but also among southerners, who were anxious to show their support of the Second Republic and civilian rule. Nonetheless, as hand-embroidered babban riga continued to be worn by traditional rulers and politicians at important state events (Lamb and Holmes 1980; Picton and Mack 1979), the demand for these traditional robes was increasingly filled by women hand-embroiderers.

#### **Queen Amina Embroidery: Three phases**

Thus, Queen Amina Embroidery had a fortuitous beginning as many excellent women hand-embroiderers were producing babban riga robes at the time it began in Zaria City in 1994. For women, hand-embroidery (*dinkin hannu*) was an important source of income. It was also more accessible, as it did not require a large cash outlay as with other occupations open to them, as one Zaria City woman, Zaliha Muhammadu Sani, explained:

Before, I was selling soup ingredients but now I don't have money to buy them. But hand-embroidery, you can do it for people [without needing capital] and get money. And especially for us women who stay at home, it is good for us (2 July 2002, Zaria City).

Initially, fifteen women were identified for their hand-embroidery expertise and were given embroidery thread and cloth with the pattern to be embroidered, which Ms. Yusuf had obtained from Zaria City market. Embroiderers receive embroidery materials to produce specified items in two particular Hausa embroidery styles. The first style utilized embroidery designs and stitches used in babban riga robes (including chain stitch, buttonhole stitch, and rosette buttonhole stitch [Menzel 1972, vol. 1: 99-106; see also Heathcote 1974a,b]) made into table linens, pillow

covers, bags, and kaftans, using cotton thread and cotton damask fabric (figure. 1). The second style, formerly used by Hausa women to decorate bed linens, utilizes brightly colored cotton thread in an interlocking satin stitch (cf. Menzel 1972:141-42) on white cotton cloth in depictions of flowers, animals, and bicycles figs 2a,b). These embroideries are sold as wall hangings.



**Figure. 1.** Queen Amina Embroidery pillows, with patterns used on *babban riga* embroidered robes: *bita da kallo* ("come and look") and *dagi arewa* (northern knot).



**Figure. 2a.** Cars, birds, flowers, and sun wall-hanging, hand-embroidered cotton thread on cotton fabric, embroidered by Abu Adamu, Queen Amina Embroidery, Anguwar Jushin, Zaria City.



Fig. 2b. Display of marriage items, with women's hand-embroidered fabric used as table cloth, Anguwar Kwarbai, Zaria lity, 1994.

Hassana Yusuf manages the distribution of all materials to Zaria City women, as she explains:

“After drawing designs on the cloth, I take them along with thread to women in the group who live in....Zaria City...Afterward, I pick up the finished work from the women and take it for hand-hemming by other group members..... The Queen Amina Embroidery Cooperative is important in the lives of the women, because embroidery has become part of their day-to-day activities.... It enables them to earn income to support their children in terms of feeding, medicine, and school fees. It also provides them with an outlet for their creative ability. They do very beautiful work!”

Ms. Yusuf regularly visits them to assess their progress and to pay them for completed work (fig. 3). While this work was sold in various venues in the US—mainly at the African Studies Association annual meetings—and to some Zaria City visitors, the styles and sales of Queen Amina Embroidery work were traditional and small-scale.

In December 2007, Ms. Yusuf, as the manager of Queen Amina Embroidery, was selected to participate in the programme known as Vital Voices, sponsored by the ExxonMobil Foundation. The programme was designed to foster “African Women Artisans Entrepreneurial Empowerment: Growing Arts & Crafts Businesses through Export Development to the United States,” as part of the Vital Voices African Women’s Leadership Initiative. Several Nigerian women artisan-craft workers

participated in the programme, including Nike Davies Okundaye (of Nike Art Center). Hassana attended two *Vital Voices/ExxonMobil Leadership Initiative Economic Development: Women Artisan Training* workshops, the first which was



Fig. 3. Hassana Yusuf [L] advising Queen Amina Embroidery member, Ramata Mohammadu Sani, on color combinations for embroidered pillows (Zaria City, 2009).



Fig. 4. Hand-embroidered placemats, cotton thread on co'ton damask, embroidered with variations of the *dagi arewa* (northern knot); [on left and centre], more abstract versions of the pattern [on right], associated with babban riga embroidery.

held in Cape Town, South Africa (January 2008) and the second, in Accra, Ghana (February, 2009). While her training in internet marketing and banking practices did not enable the Queen Amina Embroidery group to go forward with on-line product catalogue sales, Vital Voices hired a consultant to meet with craftswomen in

Nigeria who was to advise them on design. Ms. Heather Most's Alternative Trade Network visited Hassana Yusuf and members of Queen Amina Embroidery in the summer 2008 and made several important suggestions for design changes for Queen Amina Embroidery work. Thus rather than relying on traditional

patterns used in babban riga embroidery, she introduced simpler and stylized designs

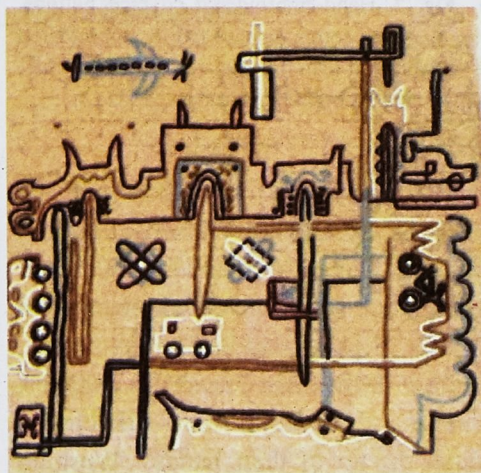


Fig. 5. Wall hanging. Central Post Office Zaria.

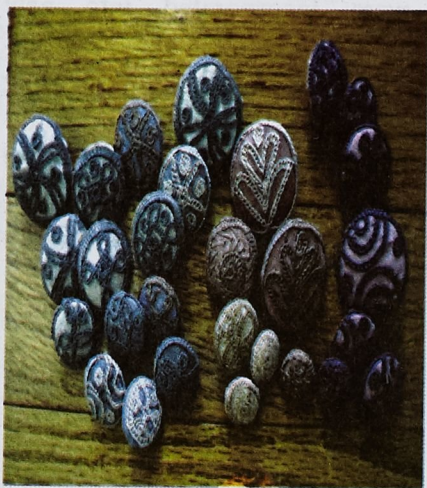
International Folk Arts Market in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which led to the development of a new style of embroidery design. For the IFAM exhibition, which is held in July on the grounds of the Museum of International Folk Art, artisans and craftspeople from around the world are selected, with an emphasis on the excellence of their traditional craft work. Representing Queen Amina Embroidery, Ms. Yusuf brought hand-embroidered babban riga and embroidered caps (both men's and children's sizes, (fig. 6); wall hangings (see fig. 2a), small pouches embroidered with the northern degi knot design, and placemats and covered buttons (fig. 7), which Heather Most had suggested. During the market, many people bought examples of Hausa hand-embroidery, which included the sale of two large babban riga.

that were incorporated into new products—small zippered bags and wall-hangings, pillows, and table linens using abstract designs (Fig. 4). Some wall-hanging designs represented murals and raised pattern designs found on public buildings, e.g., the main Zaria Post Office (fig. 5).

While members of the Queen Amina Embroidery continue to sell their work, it was the group's acceptance in the 2016



Fig.6. Hand-embroidered babban riga robe and hula cap, with cotton thread on cotton damask fabric with *tambari arewa* and *aska biyu* (two knives) patterns, by Safiya Jafaru, Anguwar Kwarbai, Zaria City.



❖ Fig. 7. Hand-embroidered covered buttons, cotton thread on cotton damask fabric, embroidered with variations of patterns used on men's big robes, Queen Amina Embroidery members, Zaria City.

It was, however, the connection with the owner, Ms. Susan Hull Walker, of the Ibu Movement Gallery in Charlestown, South Carolina, that led to the development of a new style of patterning and kaftan design. The Ibu Movement seeks to support women's "economic self-sufficiency through the art of their hands. Working with 71 artisan groups, in 34 countries, Ibu

celebrates the imagination and skill of women..."

Ms. Walker suggested that Hassana work together with Jamie Buskey, an assistant designer for the Ibu Movement, and she gladly agreed.

Jamie proposed new kaftan design dimensions, patterning, and color combinations. Hassana then worked with Queen Amina Embroidery members to produce a kaftan style, which would appeal to fashion-conscious and conscientious US buyers (fig. 8). It is hoped that this collaboration continues with new designs and opportunities for Queen Amina Embroidery in the future.



Fig. 8. Hand-embroidered kaftan, cotton thread and cotton damask, commissioned by the Ibu Movement from Queen Amina Embroidery, January 2017.



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