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Hausa

People

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Hausa, people found chiefly in northwestern Nigeria and adjacent southern Niger. They constitute the largest ethnic group in the area, which also contains another large group, the Fulani, perhaps one-half of whom are settled among the Hausa as a ruling class, having adopted the Hausa language and culture. The language belongs to the Chadic group of the Afro-Asiatic (formerly Hamito-Semitic) family and is infused with many Arabic words as a result of Islamic influence, which spread during the latter part of the 14th century from the kingdom of Mali, profoundly influencing Hausa belief and customs. A small minority of Hausa, known as Maguzawa, or Bunjawa, remained pagan.



Hausa women preparing cotton to be made into cloth

Hausa society was, and to a large extent continues to be, politically organized on a feudal basis. The ruler (emir) of one of the several Hausa states is surrounded by a number of titled office holders who hold villages as fiefs, from which their agents collect taxes. Administration is aided by an extensive bureaucracy, often utilizing records written in Arabic.

The Hausa economy has rested on the intensive cultivation of sorghum, corn (maize), millet, and many other crops grown on rotation principles and utilizing the manure of Fulani cattle. Agricultural activity has yielded considerably more than subsistence, permitting the Hausa to practice such craft specializations as thatching, leatherworking, weaving, and silversmithing. The range of craft products is large, and trading is extensive, particularly in regularly held markets in the larger towns. Hausa are also famous as long-distance traders and local vendors of Hausa-made leather goods as well as tourist items.

The Hausa have settled in cities (of pre-European origin, such as Kano), towns, and hamlets; but the great majority of the population is rural. A typical farm household consists of two or more men and their families grouped in a mud- or stalk-walled enclosure of some 1000 square feet (93 square metres) containing small round or rectangular huts with thatched roofs and a larger rectangular hut in the centre for the headman of the compound.

Social structuring is markedly hierarchical; the ranking, both of offices and social classes, is expressed in an elaborate etiquette. Individuals may be ranked as commoners, administrators, or chiefs; and varying degrees of prestige attach to different professions and levels of prosperity. Slaves were formerly numerous, some of them holding important posts in the administration. Noble lineages dominated important official positions.

Descent is patrilineal*; and close kin, especially cousins, are preferred marriage partners. Divorce, regulated by Muslim law, is frequent.

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* patrilineal: based on the male line