THE TRADITIONAL SETTLEMENTS
OF THE HAUSA PEOPLE

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It is often said that traditional forms of native settlements should provide the basis for any new development that is likely to take place in under-developed countries. The traditional settlements of the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria which are described in this article might, perhaps, come into this category. Because of the short life and high maintenance costs of Hausa traditional construction, new building methods and materials are now being introduced which are changing the form of the Hausa settlements. The traditional material of the Hausa settlements is mud, and this plastic material has been used to give a unique decorative character to houses, villages and towns. The form of settlement is also closely related to the social and religious customs of the Hausa people. The main problems in designing a new environment will lie in providing for these customs within new settlements which will be constructed of quite different materials. This article does not attempt to solve this problem, but shows how the form and layout of the Hausa settlements is related to social and religious customs, as well as to traditional construction.

Geographical and Historical Background

The flat plains of Hausaland, where the settlements are situated, are relieved only by stark outcrops of granite and magnificent stands of baobab, dorowa and cotton trees. Mature streams in shallow, well wooded valleys alternate with higher open ground sparsely covered with thornscrub. The pattern of the vegetation zones which run from east to west in parallel bands is mainly the result of the variation in rainfall, which drops from 60 inches in the south to 20 inches in the Sokoto area. Agriculture in the area is governed by two main seasons; intensive farming is carried on in the short rainy season which lasts from May to September; during the dry season building, weaving, potting and other crafts are carried on. This too, is the time for bush clearing, hunting and marriage celebrations. Groundnuts, cotton, hides and skins are the chief cash crops, while Guinea corn, millet, rice and cassava are grown in various parts of Hausaland as food crops.

An area of thick unhealthy forest separates the interior of West Africa from a coastline which has few natural harbours. Because of this barrier, trade and cultural contacts, until the arrival of the European, came from North Africa, via the Saharan caravan routes (Fig. 1). It is probable that the great medieval Sudanic empires such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai and Kanem, arose from movements of North Africans into this area.1

The Hausa Bokwoi, a group of seven related city states of Daura, Biram, Kano, Zaria, Gobir, Katsina and Rano, were evidently the result of these
population movements from North Africa. The origin of the Hausa states, however, is obscure, but various Hausa chronicles place their foundation somewhere between 100-1200 A.D. According to tradition, Islam was introduced into Hausaland in the fifteenth century by merchants from Mali, but it made slow progress at first in the Hausa states and was not fully accepted until the Fulani conquest (1804 to 1807).

**Cities and Settlements**

Continual tribal warfare before the British occupation of Northern Nigeria determined the present pattern of densely occupied walled settlements in areas of unoccupied savannah land. Apart from major cities such as Kano and Zaria which are the administrative centres of the Emirates, there are also many smaller walled settlements ringed by bush hamlets. Before the British occupation of Hausaland, the Hausa states had a well developed, pre-capitalistic economy, a complicated administration, and a varied technology which included many crafts. Despite being heavily populated and the appearance visually of having a definite urban character, the cities were, and still are, essentially, large, walled rural centres. Within the walls of the city, the built-up area is only about half of the total acreage; the remainder being agricultural land. The rural character of Zaria, for example, is most pronounced during the rainy period when the hard
latterite roads between the houses turn to muddy tracks and the mud walls disappear behind the tall stalks of guinea corn planted on every available piece of land within the built-up area.

While average densities are very low,\(^5\) densities within the built-up areas of settlements are extremely high; old Anchau in the Zaria Emirate having a density of 21,000 persons per square mile.\(^6\) Compounds so far studied show local densities for individual holdings ranging from 100 to 500 persons per acre.

Although pagan settlements are not within the scope of this study, it is interesting to note that the Muslims of Hausaland regarded the pagan tribes as legitimate plunder, providing them with a source of slaves for the Emir and the various officials in his administration.\(^7\) One of the chief forms of investment open to these officials was the founding of slave settlements.

THE EMIRATE CITIES: ZARIA

It is difficult to generalize about the layout of the major Emirate cities. Most of them, however, have quite well-defined quarters separated from the old city. The lay-out pattern of Zaria, in particular, emphasizes the separation of the various quarters. The barriers between the quarters are the railway track, the river or the city wall itself. The settlement resembles a cluster of independent urban centres rather than a single unit. The pattern as it exists, reflects religious, racial and cultural differences.

The European or residential quarter is generously laid out with large avenues of madaci and neem trees. At its centre it has its club, racecourse and sports field. In this area, too, are found the provincial or district administrative offices, law courts and post office.

The Syrian quarter in contrast is highly commercial. The chief unit, which is repeated throughout, is the open-fronted shop with living accommodation above.

The Sabon Gari (literally, new town) is occupied chiefly by Southern Nigerians who came to find work in the industries, commercial firms and administrative organizations that followed in the wake of the railway. The street pattern in the Sabon Gari is set out to a rigid grid; the buildings are mainly concrete block walls with tin pan roofs. Everywhere there are junk heaps of rusting cars and bicycle spares. In fact, it is a shanty town, full of brash character, noise and colour.

Tudan Wada, another distinct quarter just outside the walls of the old city, is inhabited chiefly by Muslim strangers. This area, like the Sabon Gari, is laid out in a grid iron street pattern conforming with health and byelaw regulations introduced by the British. Here, however, the buildings are a regularized version of the traditional Hausa buildings.

THE STREET PATTERN

Within the apparently formless complex of mud dwellings that exists inside the city walls, there is a basic pattern of street blocks. Each street block, irregular in shape, is enclosed by a high mud wall and contains the main social and economic
unit of the 'extended family'. The occupants in the house shown in Fig. 6 number 215. The land within the compound walls, apart from housing 215 persons, is also intensively used for crop growing, goat and chicken runs and many crop trees like mango and dorowa.

The family compounds are linked by pedestrian routes which connect the market place, the Friday mosque and the gateways. These routes are a sequence of spaces, with passages, barely wide enough to take a fully laden donkey, connecting outdoor praying places, shaded sitting and teaching areas and large formless borrow pits (Figs. 2, 15 and 21).

Changes in street scenes take place with considerable rapidity due mainly to the instability of mud as a building material. Figure 3 shows in a remarkable way the effect of the cycle of organic change on a small group of pedestrian spaces in Daura over a period of thirteen years. These changes, occasioned by the impermanent nature of the building material, are also a consequence of the traditional attitude to land in West Africa. Ownership of land as such does not exist; occupancy and use are the only rights to land. Land and boundary disputes are decided by the Emir, but good neighbourliness and a common interest in the use of the public spaces is probably enough to prevent their complete alienation to private users.
Fig. 3—Daura
Public circulation areas showing entrance halls to a number of houses, and one house in its entirety (at right of drawing)

Fig. 4—Kazaure.
Plan of a house of a member of the royal family

KEY FOR ALL PLANS

M Man's Hut
W Woman's Hut
OW Old Woman's Hut
K Kitchen
CK Covered Kitchen
L Larina
Z Zaure (entrance hall)
OR Outside Resting Area
WA Washing Area
R Reception Room
MS Maigida's (head of family) Saasa
LIC Hut under construction
RU Ruin
OF Outdoor Praying Area
M Mosque
CA Garage
GU Guest's Room
G Granary
F(M) Man's Food Store
F(W) Woman's Food Store
VG(W) Woman's Vegetable Garden
St Store
S Shop
La Lettable Space
NW Nightwatchman's Hut
Sh Shrine
N Neem tree
Ma Mango tree
P Palm tree
B Boobab tree
CA Cattle, goats and other farm animals

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The Family House

In these traditional Hausa settlements the Muslim womenfolk are in purdah, and though their house plan follows the traditional African pattern with rooms arranged within, or around, a courtyard (Fig. 4) it has been developed to provide for segregation of the sexes (auren kulle). The entrance to the house (gida) is through the entrance hut (zaure) which may be round with a conical thatch roof, or, depending upon the wealth of the family, an elaborate two storeyed building with an upper floor of guest rooms. Circulation from the zaure to the family part of the house (cikin gida) is through one or more courtyards. In these courtyards are huts for unmarried male youths and male guests, and around them are further huts which are entrances to the various quarters (sassa) of the individual families who make up the extended family group. Within the sassa each wife has one or two huts which she decorates with her dowry and other belongings and in which she sleeps with her children. Each married male may have a hut of his own (turaka) in which his wives sleep two nights each, when it is their turn to cook the family meals.

Enquiries in the field show that a man, once he has been allocated a piece of land, first builds his compound wall, his entrance hut and one or more sleeping huts. Huts and subdivisions within the compound wall are added when and where it is found to be necessary. This development of accommodation to suit family needs works in reverse also; sometimes accommodation falls into ruins or is demolished to make way for more agricultural land in the compound. Like the settlement itself, the house is not an accumulation of accommodation which is static during a man’s lifetime. It is constantly adapted to suit his changing needs, the unit of growth and decay being the hut.
Figs. 6 and 7—Zaria. Plan and section of the Mallawa House. The present occupants are descendants of the first Fulani Emir of Zaria.
Fig. 8—Eastern Nigeria. A house in Nnewi

Fig. 9—Daura. Round grain stores (View 4 in Fig. 3)
Fig. 10—Kano. Within the city walls.

Fig. 11—Kazaure. The Friday mosque.
Fig. 12—Zaria. The interior of the Friday mosque.

Fig. 13—Kano. Decorated ceiling in the house of Alhaji Ado.

Fig. 14—Zaria. Decorated doorway.
Fig. 15—Zaria. Street scene

Fig. 16—(right) Sokoto. The interior of the Shehu's mosque

Fig. 17—(below) Kano. Dye pits within the city walls
Mud Building Construction and Decoration

The Hausa city erupts organically in muddy outcrops from its latteritic plain and the continuity of its basic material is broken only by the angular shapes of the cotton trees or the thick foliage of the mango. The elemental building unit, the room, whether round or rectangular, domed or flat, and its connecting wall, which together form the internal and external spaces, is governed in dimension by structural limitations.

The building operation is such that previously prepared, well puddled cone-shaped balls of latterite (tubali) are laid in rough courses. The height to which these tubali can be thrown to the builder sitting astride the top of the wall determines the maximum economic height for a wall with no intermediary floor, while the lower level the wall assumes is just sufficient to give headroom or to screen the compounds. Scaffolding or ladders are used only in the more important buildings and occasionally in entrance halls to increase the more usual sizes. (Figs 19 and 20).

Spaces are spanned with roughly hewn azara, a fibrous palm tree which is free from attack by white ants. The economic span for common baulks of azara is about 6 ft and rooms larger than this span are broken down into 6 ft units by the use of mud columns and azara beams or 'arches'. This is not a true arch in any structural sense but a reinforced curved beam. A series of cantilevered lengths of azara built into the mud arch form the main reinforcement while additional azaras are used to counteract shear and to distribute the thrust of the arch into the wall.10

A wall with openings not only allows sun, hot air and rain into the room, but also erodes more quickly than a completely blank wall. For these reasons wall surfaces are broken only by small doors of approximately 5 ft 6 ins x 2 ft and windows, when they exist, are little more than ventilation slots. The mud grille which is used chiefly for verandah walls to zaures is a very pleasant contrast to the expanse of undulating solid walls.

The colours of the various wall finishes vary from the dark purple of makuba (a mixture of latterite and crushed beans from the dorowa) through the varying grey browns of the latterite/dung mixtures to the silver grey of lazo, which is by far the most expensive waterproofing compound, being a mixture of latterite and ash additives.

Decorations of varying degrees of boldness are used on buildings throughout Hausaland. By far the greatest quantity of decorative work is to be found in Zaria, and it is there too, that the art of mud decoration is practised with the greatest degree of fluency (Fig. 14).

The decoration on the interior of the Friday mosque (Fig. 12) built by Babban Gwani Mallam Mikaila for Emir Abdulkerim (1834-1846) is, perhaps, the high point in Hausa decoration. Babba Gwani’s bold use of simple decorative elements such as the circle, the triangle and rhythms of verticals and horizontals, supplement the main structural forms, though the more complex pattern on the west face of
the massive central pillar points the way to later work where an exuberance of patterning is carried over all intersecting and projecting surfaces. The house of Alhaji Ado in Kano is an extreme example of this work, where shapes within the room are lost in a vast web of interlacing designs (Fig. 13). The Friday mosque in Zaria is a magnificent monument built in the declining years of an era of religious zeal that saw, under the leadership of Shedu Usman dan Fodio, the full conversion to Islam of the Hausa states. The Shehu’s mosque (Fig. 16) a simple, undecorated, hypostyle hall, with columns at 7 ft 6 in centres is the most direct way of creating in mud a large covered praying space, and its uncompromising simplicity captures fully the puritanical fervour of the age.

Anthony Kirk-Green has suggested that the decorative forms used by the Hausa builders have their origins in the Sudan and Middle East, the designs being brought to Hausaland by pilgrims returning from Mecca bringing with them intrically designed leatherwork. While it is true that much present day Hausa leatherwork and embroidery show designs similar to mud decoration, there is much in this decoration that is negroid in character. The same linear quality that is found in later Hausa decorations can be seen in the carved timber panels used in the traditional Ibo buildings of Eastern Nigeria, while the triangle, lozenge and circle are forms which are used by the pagans of the Jos Plateaux, the people of Gobir, and the Ibos and Yorubas of the forest belt.

Hausa building is a family concern, knowledge being passed from father to son, it is, therefore, more than likely that many of the forms and the patterns used by the present day builders are derived and developed from those used by their ancestors. We could, therefore, look for the origins of present day decoration in natural forms developed from finger work in mud. Natural movements used in the application of macuba and other waterproof finishes result in repetitive patterning while the circle is still made by throwing a pat of mud onto the wall and palming it to shape. The underside of the plastered azara ceilings produces a complex coffering which is also reminiscent of many decorative patterns.

The mud roof of the Hausa building is the element requiring the greatest amount of repair and maintenance. It is unlikely that this element, at least in its present form, is indigenous in the Sudan. In Bornu, a state whose foundation predates the Hausa states and whose conversion to Islam was in the 11th century, there is evidence of a mosque with a mud roof being built in the 12th century, but the indigenous roof structure is more likely to be similar to that used by the pagans of the Jos Plateaux who are probably akin to the early inhabitants of the Hausa Plains. The Pagan houses have circular mud walls protected by a steeply sloping conical roof with large overhang. This type of construction is similar to those of the forest dwellers and is eminently suited to the climate.

Many of the rulers of the Mali and the Songhai empires visited Mecca and returned with Muslim scholars. Al Saheli, who was such a scholar, accompanied Manso Musa, the ruler of Mali (1307-1332) on his return journey from Mecca, and is credited with the introduction of burnt brick architecture into West Africa. Al Saheli is said to have built palaces and mosques at Gao and Timbuctu.
It was from Mali that Islam was first introduced into Hausaland in the fifteenth century, so that the pre-Fulani minaret at Katsina (Fig. 18) is probably related to the work of Al Saheli or other scholars bringing descriptions of towers and mosques such as the Mosque of Ahmad Ibn Tulun (built 876-9) in Cairo or the Great Mosque at Qairawan.

The embattlements that used to crown the mud wall that surrounds Kano were probably reproductions of walls seen by travellers in North Africa surrounding such towns as Susa, erected after the Hiraj. Thus a North African influence may be the generator of the familiar pinnacles (zankwaye) that are used by present day buildings at the corners or the junctions of walls. However, between the Northern territories of Ghana and Timbuctu, in the area of Mossi-Dagomba states (whose origin dates from the same population movements that formed the Hausa states), there are mud mosques which are, in effect, a cluster of pointed buttresses. These mosques like their sometimes close neighbours, the giant ant hills, present little or no flat surface to the rain and represent an exceptionally good way of using mud in an area of high rainfall. In certain of these mosques the projecting buttresses turn to pinnacles which are flush with the surface of the wall.

Present building and decorative forms are a result of the assimilation by negro peoples of an influx of ideas brought by a series of migrations from North Africa. Many of the customs associated with King Worship are practised by the tribes in the forest belt of West Africa, and undoubtedly the first immigration into Hausaland was of people from the region of the Nile, possibly from Meroe or at least from an area thoroughly influenced by Meroe. Even today, it is difficult to ignore many features of the older mosques of Hausaland that remind one of ancient Egypt, though similarities of this kind are probably better explained by the fact that the Hausa men and the Egyptians had similar roofing problems to tackle, and, though far apart in time, reached the same solution. Superimposed then, on a basically negro use of mud to suit regional climatic conditions, are the influences from North Africa consciously introduced by pilgrims returning from Mecca, bringing new ideas with them. These influences and ideas, like the various

Fig. 22—Mosque near Wa in northern Nigeria.
races that have come to the area, have been assimilated, and a style of building has evolved which is personal to the Hausa people and it is not repeated in any other part of West Africa. Although changes did take place in the administration and government of Zaria after the Fulani conquest, much that existed in Habe (pre-Fulani) times continued through the Fulani era. There is little reason to doubt that the continuity of building forms and ideas that Babban Gwani has passed down through his family of builders to the present Sarkin-Magina (chief builder of Zaria) was also a feature of the times before the great builder of the Friday mosque at Zaria.

This family tradition of building, the predominant use of one material, together with the structural, almost modular, discipline required in the use of reinforced mud building, has given a great unity in time to settlements whose organic pattern of growth and decay is exceptionally rapid.

Current Changes

After the British arrival in Nigeria, Hausaland was introduced to western civilization, and with the opening up of communications, the development of overseas trade, and the introduction of western education, forces have been unleashed that are tending to disrupt the unity of the almost self-contained Hausa settlements. The Hausa man has been introduced to new ideas from the various peoples who live on the perimeter of his walled cities, and with the wireless and newspapers, isolation is no longer possible.

It is interesting to see how the Hausa people who have moved south to Ibadan and Lagos have adapted their house planning to suit restricted conditions, where land has a high value and rambling hut arrangements around courtyards are not practicable (Fig. 23). In Lagos particularly, the pull of the extended family is breaking down amongst people with a western education and there is a tendency towards a more western approach to marriage.

Changes are taking place in all the major settlements of Hausaland; Sokoto, the religious centre of the Hausa states since the beginning of Fulani rule, is the scene of the demolition of the Shehu’s mosque and its replacement by a mosque of completely foreign style—a prestige monument having no roots or connections with its indigenous neighbours.

Fig. 23—Ibadan. Ground floor plan of the house of a Hausa trader.
Daura, the legendary home of the Hausa people, a small walled settlement near the northern border of Nigeria, is busy investing in fifty feet wide tree-lined streets that disrupt the existing pattern of development, but provide valuable open space within heavily populated areas.

In all the settlements individuals are experimenting with new building materials. Maintenance costs on mud buildings are high, and when a Hausa man has capital to invest he invariably builds a house using more permanent materials. Of the larger settlements, Zaria city is the one that has retained most completely its traditional character, but even here, over the last thirty or so years some of the builders have introduced modern symbols like the bicycle and aeroplane into their mud decoration. These symbols stand together with the old forms and are accepted into the pattern as pure decoration. Builders, other than those belonging to the traditional school have introduced a painted decoration of repetitive geometric forms which, though pretty, has none of the boldness of the work of Babban Gwani and his line of builders. Iron roofs and walls other than of mud are being introduced into Zaria too, and the process of change, so evident at the moment, is brought into sharp focus when one sights a television aerial thrusting its way aggressively through the mud roofscape.

The use of materials like sandcrete blocks and corrugated iron by builders with no experience or tradition in their use, produces incongruous elements in the townscape. While the Hausa builder using his traditional materials can humanize the grid-iron of Tudan Wada, his efforts at adding to the old cities with new forms are unsuccessful.

Lack of fresh air inside the buildings and overcrowding result each year in outbreaks of dust-born diseases like meningitis, and make imperative a new approach to house design, using new materials to achieve healthier living conditions. Modern sewerage systems which may replace the Hausa pit latrine, piped water and other services, together with provision for the motor car, will require a more ordered grouping of houses. These inevitable changes will mean the end of an era of mud building that has produced many lovely buildings set in pleasant urban landscapes.

While the present plastic character of the Hausa mud settlements, which is the greater part of their charm, must undoubtedly change to be replaced by a rectangular discipline based upon a regular blockwork construction, it is hoped that other features of the present patterns will be retained. The urban quality of the settlements, might be continued in narrow pedestrian access ways to groups of houses joined by screen walls. The houses, possibly, may back onto, and expand when necessary into, green spaces which would be used for household crops. Within the compound the African system of courtyard planning whether adapted to provide for sex segregation or not, is ideally suited to life in the tropics and must surely continue. The Hausa man will continue to decorate his buildings but how far he will be successful in adapting a decorative style that is an integral part of his building construction to other alien structures will remain to be seen.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

4 In 1940 Northern Nigeria was finally pacified and effective British administration introduced.
5 Until the figures in the latest census are available,* it is impossible to give up-to-date averages.
densities vary from 60 persons per square mile in the Zaria Emirate to 800 persons per square
mile in the Kano Emirate, while it is likely that the area immediately around Kano has densities over 400
persons per square mile.
8 These sketches show small-scale-change, but three months after my original survey I returned to
Daura and found a fifty foot wide residential road being driven through what had been, on my previous visit,
a densely populated group of compounds. Enquiries on the site showed that the Emir had allocated land on the
outskirts of the settlement for the displaced families.
9 Generally it is true that ownership of land in a western sense is non-existent in Hausaland. T. L. V.
Blair, in his sociological study of Kano has noted that in some districts of Kano houses are bought and sold,
and family tenure is being substituted by individual tenure. T. L. V. Blair, Giant of the North, in the Miles of Change,
June 8th, 1965, West Africa.
No. 19, 1949.
12 A. H. Leary, a member of the staff of the Department of Fine Art at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria,
is at present carrying out a study of the decorative forms used by the Hausa builders and he has suggested to me
that there may be a link between patterns in current use and pre-muslim folklore and totemism.
19 Mallam Musa Maludhin Gini, the leading decorator in Zaria at the present time, is descended in direct
line through his father, Ibrahim Sakin Magina (head of the builders of Zaria) from the builder of the Friday
mosque, Zaria.

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