



From Heritage to Modern Influence: Changing Criteria in the Conferment of Occupational Titles in Kano

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Abstract: This study explores how traditional occupational titles are conferred in Kano (a popular Hausa kingdom in northern Nigeria), with a focus on the cultural standards that guide the process both in the past and today. The research draws on a combination of library materials and interviews with experts familiar with these traditions. It is framed within the 'Theory of Social Change, Cultural Evolution, and Human Development,' which provides a lens for understanding how cultural practices adapt over time. The study pursues two main goals: first, to trace the historical roots of selected traditional occupational titles, and second, to examine the criteria used in their conferment across different periods. To achieve this, it asks key questions: Where did these titles originate? And what principles shape their conferment? Findings show that the conferment of traditional occupational titles in Kano is deeply rooted in cultural heritage, yet the standards guiding the process have evolved, reflecting broader changes in the Hausa society.

Keywords: Hausa Culture, Traditional Titles, Occupational Titles, Chieftaincy, Kano.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Chieftaincy has always been a central pillar in many human societies. Where it is absent, communities often experience disorder and instability in their daily affairs (Argungun, 2017, p. 1). In Hausaland, the institution of chieftaincy has attracted the attention of historians and cultural scholars who have traced its evolution from simple family structures to complex political systems.

The journey began at the household level, where authority rested with the *maigida* (head of the household), supported by the *Uwar Gida* (the first wife) and their children, as explained by Bunza

(2023). As households expanded into *Gidan Gandu* (extended households) and later into *Tunga* (small settlements), social organization became more complex. Neighborhoods (*Unguwanni*) emerged under the leadership of a *Maiunguwa*, and with further growth, villages, districts, and emirates were established (Alhassan *et al.*, 1988, p. 67). This expansion brought about formal leadership roles such as the *Dagaci* (village head), the *Hakimi* (district head), and ultimately the *Sarki* (king), who functioned as the supreme authority. The system was hierarchical, with the *Sarki* at the top, delegating power to the *Hakimai* and *Dagatai* beneath him. [1]

¹ Interview with Danrimin Kano, Alhaji Sarki Waziri, at his office in Kano Emirate Headquarters, Tuesday, April 5th, 2024, at 3:30 pm.

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Within this broader political structure, traditional occupational titles also emerged. These titles were conferred on leaders of various professional guilds who oversaw the affairs of craftsmen, artisans, and traders. Each trade had a designated leader responsible not only for maintaining order and resolving disputes but also for safeguarding the cultural values of the profession (Suleiman, 2025, p. 2). Examples include *Sarkin Noma* (chief of farmers), *Sarkin Makera* (chief of blacksmiths), *Sarkin Gini* (chief of builders), *Sarkin Rini* (chief of dyers), *Sarkin Aska* (chief of barbers), *Sarkin Kida* (chief of praise-singers), *Sarkin Roƙo* (chief of beggars), and *Sarkin Fawa* (chief of butchers), among many others.

Occupational life itself represents a pathway to self-reliance, enabling individuals to secure food, clothing, shelter, and other basic needs (Duruminlya, 2006, p. IX).

This study, therefore, examines the cultural standards that guide the conferment of these traditional occupational titles in Hausaland, with particular attention to Kano. It compares the criteria employed in the past with those used today. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Trace the historical origins of selected traditional occupational titles.
2. Identify the principles and standards that guide their conferment.

2.1 Culture (*Al'ada*)

The concept of culture has been defined in different ways by scholars. Dangambo (1984, p. 38) describes it simply as:

Al'ada ce abar da aka saba yi, yau da gobe. Akwai al'adu da dabi'u da yawa da Hausawa ke yi. Misali al'adun da suka shafi aure, da zumunci da sauransu.

Translation:

Culture is the set of practices people engage in daily life. Among the Hausa, culture is expressed through a wide range of customs and values, such as those governing marriage, kinship, and social relations.

Other researchers who have explained the concept of culture include Ibrahim (1982), Bunza (2006), Galadanci *et al.*, (1990), Maitama (2011), Muhammad (2020), Newman and Roxanna (2020), and Sani (2022).

In this study, culture is understood as the total way of life through which a community

expresses its identity, beliefs, and social organization. It encompasses the language, customs, values, norms, traditions, and artistic expressions that guide human behavior and social interaction within a specific group. Among the Hausa, culture functions as a living system of meaning transmitted from one generation to another through oral traditions, proverbs, folktales, dress, cuisine, and communal practices. It serves as both a mirror of collective identity and a guide for moral conduct, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others within their social environment.

Hausa culture, therefore, is not limited to outward practices such as greetings, festivals, or marriage rites, but also reflects a deep moral and philosophical orientation rooted in communal harmony, respect for elders, and social solidarity. It is grounded in the Hausa language (*harshen Hausa*), which acts as a vehicle for expressing shared experiences and values. Through language, religion, and daily interaction, the Hausa people preserve their cultural heritage while adapting to social change. In essence, Hausa culture represents a dynamic system of values and behaviors that sustain the identity, unity, and continuity of the Hausa community across time and space.

2.2 Conferment (*Nadi*)

The Hausa Dictionary (2006, p. 355) defines *nadi* in two ways: "*ba da mukami na sarauta*" ko "*zagaya abu dogo kamar rawani a ka ko wani wuri a jiki ko wani abu na daban*". Thus, it refers to the conferment of a chieftaincy title, and as the act of winding or wrapping, such as tying a turban around the head. Within the context of this research, *nadi* refers specifically to the conferment of a traditional leadership title. It is viewed as a cultural process through which authority is granted to an individual to lead, represent, and safeguard the interests of a particular occupational or social group.

2.3 Occupational Chieftaincy Titles (*Sarautun Sana'o'i*)

The concept of occupational chieftaincy titles has been explained in various ways by earlier authorities. Alhaji Dauda (Sallaman Kano) describes them as:

Sarautu ne da ake bayarwa ga wani jajirtacce da ya kebanta da wata sana'a ta gargajiya. Galibi ba a ba wani irin wannan sarauta sai wanda ya gaji irin wannan sana'a yake yin ta, kuma ya kware a cikinta.^[2]

Translation

Titles bestowed upon individuals who have distinguished themselves in a particular traditional

² Interview with Sallaman Kano, Alhaji Dauda, at his residence in Kofar Kwaru within the palace of His

Highness the Emir of Kano, Wednesday, April 6, 2024, 8:00 p.m.

craft or trade. Such titles are usually hereditary, conferred only on those who have inherited and mastered the occupation.

In a similar vein, Alhaji Wada Muhammad (Shamakin Kano) defines occupational titles as:

Sarautu ne da ake naɗa wa wani daga cikin rukunin wasu al'umma da suke gudanar da wata sana'a ta gargajiya. Akan ba da wannan sarauta ga wani babba a cikin masu wannan sana'a domin ya jagorance su da yi musu sulhu a tsakaninsu tare da inganta harkokin da suka shafi rayuwarsu.^[3]

Translation

Occupational Chieftaincy titles are positions granted to members of a professional group engaged in a traditional craft. These titles are typically given to elders within the group, who serve as leaders, mediators, and custodians of the group's welfare and activities.

These perspectives highlight that occupational chieftaincy titles are largely hereditary and reserved for individuals within the craft community. They are typically conferred on respected figures whose voices carry authority and whose leadership ensures both the preservation of tradition and the smooth functioning of the occupation.

2.4 A Historical Overview of Kano City

Kano's history occupies a central place in the cultural and economic development of Hausaland. For centuries, the city has been a focal point of commerce, learning, politics, and craftsmanship, earning recognition not only within Hausaland but across Africa. Because of its prominence, Kano has been the subject of numerous studies (Palmer, 1908; Dokaji, 1958; Bahago, 1998; Waya, 2000; Ibrahim, 2001; Gwangwazo, 2004, 2005; Almajir, 2009; Bilhassan, 2018; Sani & Maikwari, 2019; Dan-iy, 2020).

Rather than repeating earlier historical accounts, this study highlights key aspects of Kano's development that are most relevant to the present discussion. Geographically, Kano lies in the Hausaland, bordered by Borno and Bauchi to the east, Katsina to the west, Zaria to the south, and the Republic of Niger to the north (Dokaji, 1958). This location made it a strategic center of trade and interaction; a role frequently celebrated in Hausa oral traditions and poetry. For example, Aminu Ladan

Abubakar (ALAn Waka) famously describes Kano as the "mother of Hausa states" and a hub of commerce and craftsmanship in his poem *Tumbin Giwa*.

The city's rise was also fueled by its fertile land and rich natural resources. Productive farmlands sustained large-scale agriculture, while deposits of iron ore from Dala Hill and surrounding areas supported thriving industries in blacksmithing and crafts (Gusau, 1988). These resources drew migrants from far and wide, many of whom settled around the hills encircling Kano, including Magwan, Fanisau, and Gwauron Dutse.

Oral traditions trace the origin of the city's name to a leader of the Abagayawa, the earliest known settlers. His successor, Barbushe, was remembered for his leadership until internal crises destabilized the settlement. This led some residents to seek refuge in Daura, prompting Sarkin Bawo of Daura to send his son, Bagauda, to Kano, where he established political order and became recognized as the city's first ruler (Almajir, 2009).

Over the centuries, Kano expanded both politically and spatially. Emir Muhammadu Rumfa (1463–1499) is credited with reorganizing the city into ten wards and constructing the palace that remains the seat of traditional authority (Adamu, 1999). Several surrounding villages were also incorporated into Kano's domain. By the twentieth century, the push for regional autonomy culminated in the creation of Kano State on 24 May 1967, following sustained agitation led by figures such as Ahmad Tireda, Tanko Yakasai, and Aminu Kano (Almajir, 2009).

In terms of its early population, Kano was shaped by two key groups: the Maɗatai,⁴ Yamalawa migrants known for irrigation farming, and hunting communities led by Gwale, Sheshe, Yakasai, and Guguwa. Their settlements eventually developed into some of Kano's major wards. As hunting gave way to agriculture, Kano became a vital center of food production. During periods of famine in West Africa, it was one of the few places where food remained abundant, attracting migrants and solidifying its role as a leading economic and cultural hub.

2.5 The Origin of Traditional Occupational Titles in Kano City

When one looks back at the history of traditional occupational titles in Kano, it becomes clear that they are of very long standing. From the

³ Interview with Wada Muhammad (Shamakin Kano) at his residence in Kofar Kwaru within the palace of His Highness the Emir of Kano, Wednesday, April 6, 2024, 9:00 p.m.

⁴ The Maɗatai community established a number of settlements on the outskirts of Kano. Among these are Lambu, Kanwa, Kwankwaso, Kura, Tamburawa, Yankatsari, Mariri, and Gunduwawa.

very beginning of the formation of communities in Kano, traditional occupations emerged alongside, and people became known through them. History shows that when Bayajidda came to Kano, he settled at the foot of Dala Hill with Kana the blacksmith. Kana the blacksmith was the one who forged the sword Bayajidda later used to kill the snake in Daura, known as Sarki (Adamu, 1997). Thus, from that time, it is evident that such occupations have long been practiced in Kano.

This continued across various aspects of community life, where certain special needs gave rise to the development of more occupations in Kano. Groups of people could be found engaging in hereditary crafts such as tanning, blacksmithing, weaving, dyeing, pottery, and others.⁵

In those times, when they wanted to appoint a leader or head, they would choose the eldest man among them and install him as leader. Most often, the choice fell on the one who was most skilled in the inherited craft practiced by the group (Saleh, 2006, p. 33).

As a result of these occupations, some neighborhoods in Kano derived their names from the crafts practiced by the people living there. For example, the district of Dukawa took its name from the fact that its people were originally tanners. Likewise, there is Unguwar Gini (the builders' ward), Rimin Kira (associated with blacksmithing), and Lungu Makera located in Galadanci ward within Kano.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study relied primarily on firsthand information gathered directly from the field. The core data came from selected traditional occupational titles, which served as the sample for the research. To obtain this data, interviews were conducted with individuals closely connected to the institution of chieftaincy and knowledgeable about these occupational titles. Secondary materials, such as scholarly works and published sources, were also consulted to provide context, interpretation, and additional guidance.

Although many occupational chieftaincies exist in Kano, this study focused on four specific titles, chosen as representative samples. They are:

1. Sarkin Dori (Chief of Traditional Bone Setters)
2. Sarkin Fawa (Chief of Butchers)
3. Sarkin Gini (Chief of Builders)

⁵ Interview Danrimin Kano, Alhaji Sarki Waziri, at his office in Kano Emirate Council, Tuesday, April 5, 2024, at 3:20 p.m.

4. Sarkin Kira (Chief of Blacksmiths)

The research was anchored in the *Theory of Social Change, Cultural Evolution, and Human Development*, advanced by Greenfield (2009–2016). This framework emphasizes how societies undergo cultural and developmental transformation, particularly in the shift from rural to urban life, from farming to specialized trades, from limited literacy to greater educational attainment, and from traditional to modern forms of communication and technology. These dynamics offered a useful lens for examining the historical and contemporary relevance of traditional occupational titles.

4.0 Criteria for Conferring Traditional Occupational Titles in the Past

In this context, the word “past” refers to the period beginning with the reign of Emir Abdullahi Bayero of Kano in 1927 and extending to 1963.⁶ Traditional occupational titles are among the oldest forms of leadership positions in Hausaland. Their roots can be traced back to the structure of the Hausa household, where every home typically practiced a particular craft or trade such as blacksmithing, butchery, weaving, or dyeing. Because of this, these titles carried significant weight in Hausa society and have continued to survive into the present day.

However, even though these were occupational titles, not everyone could be appointed. Certain cultural standards had to be met before an individual could be installed. The most important of these were inheritance, expertise, bravery, and knowledge of mysteries.

4.1 Inheritance (*Gado*)

Inheritance was considered the foundation of traditional titles. As explained in (Kamusun Hausa, 2006, p. 149), the term ‘*gado*’ refers to “*gadol dukiyyar da mamaci ya bari, ko kuma mukami ko hali ko sifa ko kaya da mutum ya gada*.” Thus, inheritance refers not only to wealth left behind by a deceased person but also to positions, qualities, or responsibilities passed down through generations. In the context of occupational titles, it was non-negotiable: only the descendant of a titleholder could succeed.

Crucially, inheritance alone was not enough. The heir also had to practice the craft in reality. Even if someone was the rightful heir, he would not normally be installed if he lacked practical involvement in the occupation. This is because, without firsthand knowledge, he was seen as unfit to understand or guide the craft.

⁶ During the reign of Emir Kano Muhammadu Inuwa.

Hausa oral tradition preserves this belief in poetry and song. For example, Ibrahim Narambada stated:

Jagora: *Ko dauri kokarin dan Sarki,
:Ya kai ga gadon tsoho nai,*

Yara: *Iro ya kai ga gadon Magaji,
Dango dan Garba.*

Gindi: *Ginjamin Haliru Uban Zagi
Na Malam Isa.*

Translation

Lead Singer: Historically, princes strive with might and grace,

To claim the thrones their fathers once embraced.

Chorus: Iro has ascended the seat of the heir,
Dango, son of Garba.

Base: Strong Haliru, father of Zagi,
One of Malam Isa.

Similarly, Makada Alhaji Musa Dankwairo says:

Jagora: *Kyawon dan sarki talatin,
: Dan sarki sai yay yi sittin,*

'Yan amshi: *Bai gaji gidansu ba ta bace mai,
: Sai bidar jalli, ai dugun jakkai,
: A samu na shan dawo kar a lalace.* (Gusau, 2009:102).

Translation

Lead Singer: Better for a prince to take the throne at thirty,

If he reaches sixty -

Chorus: Without claiming his family's seat, he has failed,

All he can do is struggle for money, trading with donkeys,

Just to earn enough coarse food to keep from starving.

Ibrahim Narambada notes that every prince longs to inherit his father's throne, while Alhaji Musa Dankwairo similarly sings that if a prince reaches old age without inheriting, he must turn to another trade simply to survive. Both voices highlight the centrality of inheritance in the Hausa system of titles.

3.3.2 Expertise (*Kwarewa*)

Even when a candidate was the rightful heir, he also had to be recognized as highly skilled. This requirement ensured that the person installed commanded respect, not only because of his lineage but also because of his competence. A leader without

practical skills would not inspire the same authority among fellow craftsmen.

3.3.3 Bravery (*Jaruntaka*)

Bravery was another vital criterion, especially in times when communities often faced conflicts. Hausa society valued leaders who could defend their people, whether during raids, wars, or local disputes. For this reason, bravery became closely tied to leadership in certain occupational groups. Different Hausa polities tested bravery in their own ways. In Kano, for instance, physical strength was a deciding factor, while in Katsina, wrestling contests known as "*gagara kaye*" determined succession; the victor would claim the title.⁷

3.3.4 Knowledge of Mysteries (*Sanin Asirai*)

Finally, knowledge of mysteries, including charms, rituals, and spiritual practices tied to the occupation, could strengthen a candidate's claim to a title. Such knowledge not only elevated the leader's status but also reinforced the prestige and security of the craft community under his authority.

4.0 Criteria for Conferring Traditional Occupational Titles Today

In this study, "today" refers to the period beginning with the reign of Emir Ado Bayero in 1964 and extending to the year 2025. During this era, the way traditional occupational titles are conferred has changed noticeably. While elements of the old customs still remain, modern influences have reshaped the process in significant ways. Contact with foreign cultures, the spread of new technologies, and the adoption of Western lifestyles have all left their marks.

As a result, the appointment of traditional occupational leaders is no longer determined solely by custom. Other factors now play a role, and three in particular stand out: inheritance, politics, and wealth.

4.1 Inheritance (*Gado*)

Inheritance still carries weight in the appointment of traditional leaders. For occupational titles. A person is generally expected to come from a family already connected to that trade. Unlike honorary or purely ceremonial titles, which can be given to outsiders, occupational titles are usually reserved for those who inherit the craft and the position from their parents or grandparents. In short, the principle of lineage continues to hold strong, even in a changing world.

⁷ This arrangement made it possible for Korau, who came from Tsahe, to win a wrestling contest at the

royal court of Katsina. By defeating Sannau, he rose to become the Emir of Katsina.

4.2 Politics (*Siyasa*)

Politics has become an important part of the process today. Over time, as political power in Nigeria shifted into the hands of elected officials, traditional authority could not remain untouched.⁸ When occupational titles fall vacant now, political considerations often influence the outcome. Those who share the ideology of the ruling government, or who maintain strong ties with politicians, have a better chance of being installed. In some cases, connections, negotiations, or even subtle lobbying play a role. This reflects how modern governance and traditional institutions have become intertwined.

4.3 Wealth (*Abin Hannu/Kudfi*)

Finally, wealth has become one of the most decisive factors in the present day. Here, wealth means financial resources, the money and assets recognized as the means of trade and exchange. In Kano, especially at a time when many traditional institutions face financial strain, wealth plays a central role in determining who becomes a titleholder.

The reasoning is clear: a wealthy person can more easily sustain the dignity of the office, provide financial support to the craft community, and invest in its growth. By appointing someone with means, it is believed that both the title and the trade it represents will flourish, and the community of craftsmen will enjoy greater stability and progress.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper highlight the dynamic and negotiable character of occupational titles in Kano. Far from functioning as static markers of status, these titles operate as adaptive social institutions that balance inherited authority with the shifting demands of contemporary political and economic life. Their historical evolution demonstrates that systems of prestige and legitimacy within Hausa society are continually re-articulated, guided by both longstanding cultural expectations and emergent forms of influence.

This study, therefore, highlights the importance of viewing traditional institutions not as remnants of a bygone order, but as living frameworks through which communities interpret and manage social change. The transformations observed in the criteria for title conferment reveal the capacity of these institutions to absorb new pressures while maintaining symbolic continuity with the past. By tracing these processes, the research contributes to a

deeper understanding of how cultural memory, political agency, and material conditions intersect in the governance of social life. Ultimately, the discussions affirm that occupational titles in Kano provide a valuable lens for examining the broader mechanisms through which Hausa society negotiates continuity and adapts its institutions to evolving realities.

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⁸ The political structure of governance in Nigeria has increasingly influenced the role of traditional leadership. Politicians have drawn traditional rulers into the arena partisan politics. Consequently, the

authority and relevance of traditional institutions are presently under threat from certain political actors in Nigeria.

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