

Zaria Embroidery: Stylistic Approach and Implications for the 21st Century Art Education in The Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

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Abstract

The art of embroidery has evolved, but the traditional approach is still relevant among the people of Zaria. Despite the advent of embroidery machines, the Hausa practises the manual method of the art extensively. This paper focuses on Zaria embroidery, its stylistic approach and its implication for the 21st Century art education, especially at Ahmadu Bello University. This study is instigated by the observation that there needs to be more exposure to embroidery designs in the Textile and Fashion Design section of the Department of Industrial Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Data is collected using random sampling, questionnaires, and interviews to investigate the styles and forms of embroidery in Zaria, its distribution, entrepreneurship, design methods and also the preference of users. The paper recommends that the curriculum of the art of embroidery (computerised and manual) should be reviewed to harness its contemporary potential.

Key Words: Embroidery, Decorative approach, Computer-Aided-Design, Education

Introduction

Zaria, initially known as *Zazzau*, was the capital of the Hausa kingdom of *Zazzau* which is believed to have been founded in 1536 and later was renamed after Queen Amina. According to Dennis (2008), Zaria is a meeting place for trade routes, which have been followed on foot and horseback for many years. The author further opined that the latitude of Zaria is about eleven-degree North, and the longitude is approximately seven-degree East. It is about eighty miles southwest of Kano and about forty miles northeast of Kaduna.

Zaria was the most southern of the Hausa city-states. According to McKenna (2022), the region was inhabited by the people before the rise of *Zazzau* and had a history of sedentary Hausa settlement with institutional market exchange and farming. It was a trading destination for Saharan caravans and a prominent city in the Hausa slave trade. In the late 1450s, Islam arrived in Zaria through its sister Habe cities, Kano and Katsina. Along with Islam, trade flourished between the cities as traders brought camel caravans filled with salt in exchange for enslaved people and grain. The city-state's power peaked under Queen Amina, whose military campaigns established a tributary region, including the kingdoms of Kano and Katsina. At the end of the 16th century, after Queen Amina's death, Zaria fell under the influence of the Jukun kingdom and eventually became a tributary state. Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the kingdom became a tributary state of the Songhai Empire. In 1805 it was captured by the Fulani during the Fulani jihad. British forces led by Frederick Lugard took the city in 1901 (McKenna, 2022).

The old part of the city, known as *Birnin Zazzau* or Zaria City, was initially surrounded by a wall and fortress but mostly removed. The Emir's palace is in the old city. People typically reside in traditional adobe compounds in the old city and the adjacent Tudun Wada neighbourhood. The indigenous Hausa predominantly occupies these two neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods of Samaru and Sabon-Gari are predominantly occupied by Nigerians of southern origin, such as the Igbo. These neighbourhoods were formed during the colonial period. The largest marketplace is in Sabon-Gari. Other more recent neighbourhoods include Dan-Magaji/Wusasa, PZ, Kongo, GRA-Zaria, Hanwa, Basawa, Low-cost Kofan-Gayan and Shika (Thomas, 1984). The political economy of the Hausa kingdom of Zaria (or *Zazzau* or *ZegZeg*) was based on a particular spatial constellation of communities, consisting of the walled city of Zaria, outlying agricultural villages, and vassal states. These villages and states were sources of raw materials and labour. There was a distinct political hierarchy, with the *Sarkin Zazzau* (the Emir of Zaria) heading a ranked group of titled chiefs, *sarkin* (the royals, *strata*), religious leaders (*mallamai*), commoners (*Hayakawa*), and slaves (*Bawa*). Zaria is home to Ahmadu Bello University, the largest university in Nigeria and the second largest in Africa. The institution is prominent in Fine Art, Agriculture, Science, Finance, Medicine and Law (McKenna, 2022; Dennis, 2008). Suppose

there is any area of Hausa material culture where the Hausa people, especially those of Zaria, have exhibited their inner sense of beauty and exquisite craftsmanship for decades. In that case, it is through their art of hand embroidery on men's garments (Dutsenwai, 2009).

In the view of Renne (2004), Zaria was also known for the indigo-dyeing of robes and hand-spun cotton thread, which Zaria women spun. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, hand embroidery has become a well-established craft in Hausa land owing to the successful establishment of cotton growing. The conjunction of increased Islamic influence – the presence of Islamic scholars, the use of Islamic texts, and travel on hajj, a hierarchical political organisation with an informal sumptuary code which included the distribution of 'robes of honour' as a form of political patronage, and increased cotton production – contributed to the refinement of embroidery techniques used in robe decoration and the elaboration of robe styles in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, extensive trade among the Hausa emirates and with the Muslim kingdoms to the south, and through trans-Saharan trade to the west and trans-Saharan trade to the north, led to the introduction of new styles of robes, capes, pants and footwear. Therefore, this paper examines Zaria embroidery and its implication in the 21st Century art education, particularly in the Department of Industrial Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Embroidery: Entrepreneurship Trade in Zaria

As Calburn in Gwari (2008) notes, embroidery is a worldwide art that produces styles reflecting a country's history and the prevalent culture and ideas among the people during the period it was worked. In Nigeria, according to Ogunduyile in Gwari (2008), the art of embroidery has been practised extensively by the Hausa. Dignity and power have been attached to various embroidered works worn by Emirs. Ogunduyile in Gwari (2008) believes that embroidery has a high degree of terminal skill among the Hausas. This is manifested in the regularity of form, symmetrical arrangement of motifs and rhythmic movement, which give aesthetic pleasure and value.

Embroidery, as a method of cloth decoration, is assumed to meet society's requirements for modesty and fashion. It also expresses individual and collective tastes. Embroidery in Hausa society is assumed to reflect the individual's image in his culture and society. Jefferson in Gwari (2008) believes that gorgeous, voluminous robes intricately embroidered are a symbol of prestige and rank for men in the Hausa societies. According to EduTechWiki (2019), there are embroiderers scattered across Zaria. Some of them are hand-embroiderers, while others are machine-embroiderers. Most embroiderers who are men have left the hand embroidery and moved into using machine embroidery. While some men continue to hand-embroider for specific customers, some produce machine-embroidered ready-to-wear robes sold through retail and wholesale shops.

On the other hand, studies have been carried out on embroidery outside Zaria and northern Nigeria (Ogunduyile, 2002; Wing, 2010; Adiji, Ogunduyile and Ojo, 2016). The art of embroidery in the northern part of Nigeria (Zaria) and the southwestern part of Nigeria have some similarities. From the preceding, it is clear that embroiderers and consumers provide names for embroidered designs in both cultures. In addition, the high level of Western education among the Yoruba has significantly reduced the number of hand embroiderers in the region. It is the view of scholars that embroidery may have been spread to other parts of the country from the northern part of Nigeria, which visibly formed part of their dressing.

Procedure for Manual Embroidery Making

Three types of stitches are used primarily: the chain stitch, the buttonhole stitch and the couching. The stitching is done with either imported or indigenous silk thread on either imported hand-woven cloth (see Fig 1).



Fig. 1: Hand-embroidered pillow cover
Bitá da Gallo (Always looking). Zaria City, Nigeria. Photograph by Renne (2002).

using a design known as

According to Picton and Mark in Gwari (2008), Hausa embroiderers employ a relatively small number of geometric elements which are put together in various ways, repeated and enlarged. The long triangular shape around the neck is ‘knives’; a group of five squares is ‘five houses’; a pair of interlaced ovals is a ‘knot’ or a ‘tortoise’; a double loop device is a ‘sandal’ and so on. Some of the interlacing patterns incorporated are very similar and sometimes identical to *zayyana* patterns which a *Koranic* scholar draws on a *Koran* board as a present for a pupil at the end of his period of instruction. There is the hand-embroidery on *robes* referred to as ‘*dinkin hannu*’ and machine embroidery on robes known as ‘*dinkin keke*’.

There are also named robes associated with particular embroidery patterns (for example, *aska takwas*, *aska biyu*, ‘*yar Dikwa*’). These named distinctions continue in ever more specific ways, as in different names for embroidery stitches, grades of cotton damask (*cheddar*), thread (*zare*), and types of robe finishing by beating (*buga*). Hand embroiderers usually rely on designers who specialise in drawing particular named patterns on robe pieces cut by specialist tailors. The type of embroidery pattern and the amount of embroidery used in particular patterns also affect the total price of a robe, as does the type of finishing. For example, beaters charge for three types of beating finishing, ‘*buga lema*’, ‘*buga lallashe*’, and ‘*buga fashi uku*’ (Renne, 2004).



Fig. 2. *Babban riga* design style. ‘*Yar Dikwa*’ (daughter of Dikwa), also known as ‘*YarBorno*’ (daughter of Borno). Zaria City, Nigeria. Photograph by Renne (2002).

According to Renne (2004), while some economists might characterise the production and marketing system associated with embroidered robes outlined above as outmoded and inefficient, it is nevertheless open to innovations, which has clothed northern Nigerian men for several centuries. The production of ‘*babble Riga*’ has changed in two distinct but interconnected ways. First, men formerly in control of all phases of embroidered robe production (except hand spinning of cotton thread) have adopted new technologies-specifically, embroidery machines and telecommunications- for producing and marketing *babble Riga*. Second, while some men continue to hand-embroider robes for specific customers, some produce machine-embroidered ready-to-wear robes sold through retail and wholesale shops rather than by commission or the market (*kawa*). These technological and marketing

shifts have created a gap in hand-embroidered robe production, filled by women hand-embroiderers, who produce robes in their homes that are then sold on commission, through market agents, and by travelling salesmen (Heathcote in Renne, 2004).

Features and Procedure for Machine-Stitched Embroidery

According to Adiji, Ogunduyile and Ojo (2016), although traditional hand embroidery has existed for thousands of years, machine embroidery is aged at about 200 years. Josue Hellmann created the first-hand embroidery machine in the year 1828. The authors added that four hand embroiderers could operate the machine simultaneously; this signalled the start of a revolution in embroidery. Along with the embroidery machines, design software was developed to serve various embroidery requirements specifically. This breakthrough boosted embroidery production, and a new revolution began in the embroidery industry, which led to the use of Computer-Aided-Design (CAD).

Computer-Aided-Design (CAD) Embroidery

CAD is also utilised by the embroidery industry in order to improve embroidery designs. The embroidery design software that has been developed fulfils home, commercial and industrial embroidery needs. Bidwell in Adiji, Ogunduyile and Ojo (2016) opine that various commercial and free software products enable the designing and editing of embroidery patterns and images. The purpose of the design embroidery software is to translate the drawing made on the computer into stitches and executed by the embroidery machine.

Software products usually have advanced user interfaces with sophisticated functions. The users can create a drawing, set up the number of stitches, and define the types: satin and fill stitches; it will select colours and edit the design. There are also more complicated functions, including importing images to the software and their digitalisation, offering all the main attributes of image processing. Furthermore, some of the embroidery design software solutions offer letting functions. These functions aim to convert a true type font into stitches automatically. In this way, a font character can be embroidered. Wing (2010) believes that the emergence of computerised embroidery in the fashion industry was created for factory workers or embroiderers using their hands in the fashion industry. Until the embroidery sewing machine was invented, factory workers used needles and thread manually.

Computerised embroidery means the automation of machine operation, mainly controlled by accurate computer instruction, to create high-quality and standardised embroidery designs. The embroidery machine manufacturing industry has solved the labour-intensive problem as most of the processes are done by computer. Moreover, as the entire process is planned precisely, production faults and related costs are reduced. As a result of these advantages, computerised embroidery is commonly used in the fashion industry. Nowadays, the familiarisation of fashion designers towards computerised embroidery is well used by some international fashion brands to add value to designs. It is believed that the local designers need to become more familiar with the techniques even Nigerian fashion designers, especially the older generation, seldom use computerised embroidery activity in their designs. (Adiji, Ogunduyile and Ojo, 2016).

In addition, EduTechWiki (2019) stated that embroidery has been a part of our social fabric for hundreds of years. It has been a medium for historical commentary; homage to ceremonial and religious occasions; expression of creativity; utilitarian purposes; or simply for leisure activity and social contact. Computer-controlled embroidery may be more prominent in education for many reasons. Embroidery can be used for identity building, communication and matchmaking, learning vector graphics, design introduction, programming basics, motivator, post-production and constructionist learning object.

Results

The demographic characteristics of producers of embroidery and the preferred choice of users of embroidery, as revealed from the field, shows that most producers of embroidery are middle ages of between 41- 50 years old; this represents 32% of the 50 random purposively selected respondents. Those below 30 are just 25% of the total respondents, while those between 51-60 years and those above 60 are 2 out of 50, representing 7.4%. 59.3% were married, with 22.2% single. Most producers (81.5%) were male, while only 18.5% were female, indicating that the embroidery business is still male-dominated. Two-thirds have some formal education ranging from primary to secondary, while one-third (33.3%) have no formal education.

Table 1: Distribution of embroidery producers by socio-demographic characteristics, n=50

Description	Frequency	Percentage
AGE GROUP		
Below 30 years	7	25.9
31 – 40 years	6	22.2
41-50 years	10	37.0
51-60 years	2	7.4
Above 60 years	2	7.4
MARITAL STATUS		
Single	6	22.2
Married	16	59.3
Divorced	3	11.1
Widow/Widower	2	7.4
SEX		
Male	22	81.5
Female	5	18.5
EDUCATION		
No Formal Education	9	33.3
Primary	9	33.3
Secondary	7	25.9
Tertiary	2	7.4

Table 2: Distribution of embroidery producers based on infrastructure. N=50

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Level of Technology		
Manual	32	63.0
Machine aided	7	14.8
Mass Production	4	7.4
Manual and Machine Aided	7	14.8
Do you have a shop?		
Yes	13	25.9
No	37	74.1
Do you rent a shop?		
Yes	19	37.0
No	31	63.0

Table 2 revealed that 32, representing 63% of the respondents, still use indigenous manual technology to produce their contemporary styles, while most do not own their production site.

Table 3: Distribution of embroidery producers based on production style. N=50

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Do you do the pre-fabric treatment?		
Yes	28	55.6
No	22	44.4
Do you size your fabric?		
Yes	35	70
No	15	30
What is the method of your fabric finishing?		
Iron temperature	20	40
Calabash/bottle	28	56
23.00	2	4
Do you double up layers of fabric before the pattern?		
With linen material	26	33.3
With baft material	22	29.6
12.00	2	3.7
Do you draw before the pattern?		
Yes	26	51.9
No	7	14.8
0.00	17	33.3
Are you aware of various principles of design?		
Yes	39	78
No	11	22
Do you use them?		
Yes	30	59.3
No	20	40.7
How do you assemble your design?		
Element of design	19	37.0
Conceptualisation	16	32
Inspiration	4	7.4
12.00	7	14.8
23.00	2	3.7
24.00	2	3.7

In Table 3, the majority of the producers, 39 out of 50 (78%), know the principles of design and 30, representing 59.3%, use the knowledge, usually sketching patterns before embroidery.

In design assemblage, more producers, 19, used design elements to assemble designs, while 16 used conceptualisation methods, and very few designs used other design assemblage methods.

Table 4: Distribution of Embroidery patrons by patronage pattern and preferences, n=100

Description	Frequency	Percent
Ability to identify embroidery types		
Can identify indigenous embroidery	88	88.0
Can identify modern embroidery	84	84.0
Can identify embroidery made in Zaria	78	74.0

Type of Embroidery being patronised		
Patronises hand-made embroidery	70	70.0
Patronises machine-made embroidery	83	83.0
A mix of embroidery types being patronised		
Patronises only indigenous embroidery	7	7.0
Patronises both indigenous & modern embroidery	58	58.0
Patronises only modern embroidery	24	24.0
Preference of local consumers		
Embroidery with an indigenous motif design	18	18.0
Modern ones with old surface decoration	83	83.0
Preference of Tourists		
Embroidery with indigenous surface decoration	33	33.0
Modern ones with old surface decoration	67	67.0
Cultural relevance of embroidery		
Yes	79	79.0
No	21	21.0
The Social Relevance of Embroidery		
Yes	44	44.0
No	56	56.0

Table 4 also showed that 88 out of the total respondents representing 88.0%, could identify the embroidery types. 83 respondents, representing 83.0%, patronise contemporary embroidery, while about 70% patronise indigenous embroidery. The majority of the patrons of embroidery are in the mixed sector, representing 58.0% making up 58 of the total respondents.

Based on the preferred choice of the local and tourist consumer of embroidery, the table shows that the tourist prefers indigenous embroidery made by hand; this group represented 33.0% totalling 33 out of the total respondents.

The local consumers, 83 in number, representing 83.0%, prefer modern embroidery. The majority of the respondents, 79 in number representing 79.0%, perceived indigenous embroidery as having greater cultural value than Modern ones, and 56% claimed not to know that embroidery is used to commemorate occasions.

Discussions

Embroidery is a craft that has gone through so much innovation without necessarily losing its cultural value. The major innovations in embroidery production resulted from the few 7.4% that acquired formal education, not necessarily in textile design. With the various innovation and bicultural interventions, technologically, there has yet to be much improvement because 63% of the producers still use indigenous technology to adapt to the changes. In the marketplace today and among users, contemporary embroidery has moved the design from its former wearable identity to all other uses such as souvenirs, household functional materials, even jewellery and various other items displayed in malls and other highly esteemed places at home and abroad.

The prominence of embroidery among the user in Zaria attracts more younger males than females to apprenticeship; presently, Zaria has fewer women interested in learning the craft. The reason is that embroidery is men-driven craftsmanship due to Hausa tradition. It was gathered that few interested women are non-indigenes and are from Mali, Niger and Senegal. Another information is that few indigene women who practice embroidery design are wives of men who embroidered in the comfort of their homes.

With the new trend of the machine-made embroidery, more young men are acquiring the skills and adapting the cloth to an entirely new range of products, such as embroidery on towels as souvenirs, designs on table spreads, handkerchiefs, curtains and customised clothing, as well as a sampler. Embroidery produced for traditional uses is patterned with curvilinear-geometrical designs that carry messages for those trained in their interpretation. In contrast, contemporary embroidery exhibits much distortion using abstract designs, graphic signs, and symbols. End-users interviewed declared that their preference for indigenous embroidery, especially on caps, is a result of the originality and social pride associated with it.

The study revealed that machine-made embroidery is more popular on wearable clothing like *kaftan*, *agbada*, *baban riga*, and *bubu*, while indigenous embroidery is common on caps. Although some men's free-flow gowns (*kaftan*) are adorned with hand-made embroidery, they are more expensive than machine-made ones. Particularly some royally inclined garments (such as *fada*, *galadima*, and *sarki*, to mention but a few). The study presented stereotypical mass production techniques of hand-made as cumbersome and averagely compensated for the labour. On the contrary, during the interview, an embroiderer remarked the economic value of embroidery as a support stating that the minimum work charge is three thousand Naira (₦3 000). *Cinbaki* (₦3,000), *Kufta* neck (₦5,000), *Kufta* neck and hand (₦8,000–₦10,000), and *Kufta* hand (₦15,000) are all examples of Zaria embroidery design. Embroidery for royal designs often costs between ₦60,000 and 50,000 Naira (₦60,000 – ₦50 000).

The result of the interview also suggested that apprenticeship training in embroidery design often lasts six months to a year. This suggests that training for students may occur during their ITF (Industrial Training Fund) period or after the student may have graduated. In Zaria, the materials and tools for making embroidery designs on the fabric are needles (*Allura*), thread (*Zare*), cotton yarns (*Audiga*), crochet (*Abawa*), Pencil (*Alkalami*), Calabash (*Kwara da kwalba*). On the cloth, sketches are made using a pencil. The majority of these sketches are made from samples that people brought or are representations of northern symbols, logos, geometric shapes, or abstracted shapes. *Dagi* (the Northern Knot symbol), *Wuka da Dabino* (palm fronds and a sword), *Askara*, *wundiya*, *kwado da linzami*, *Kufta*, *Cinbaki*, and others are examples of these logos.

The manual technique involves a needle carefully threaded with three to four tightly packed strands. The yarns are occasionally coloured with conventional dye. The traditional hues of the Hausa people are used in embroidery designs. Green (*kriya*), maroon (*Makuba*), blue (*shade*), black (*Baki*), and purple (*kumkum*) are examples of these hues. With the aid of the fabric sketch, stitches are added after the yarns have been threaded through the needle. After that, the fabric is typically ironed using a calabash and bottle.

Conclusion

Embroidery is an aspect of textile design which is a branch of art. It should be taught in the Department of Industrial Design, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, because Textiles and Fashion Design is one of the specialising areas in the department. Presently, the department needs more exposure to embroidery designs because the curriculum needs to cover that area. As a section situated in the most outstanding university in sub-Saharan Africa, it is posed with the challenge of producing a state-of-the-art type of embroidery design. The students must be exposed to hand, machine, and computerised embroidery to fit into the 21st-century labour market. There are instances where 'fashion designers' in town come to offer degree programmes in the department. Therefore, students should be confronted with better experiences, new media and technologies. This way, the art of embroidery will blossom and grow in leaps and bounds within Zaria.

Recommendations

This paper suggests the following recommendations:

- The university (Ahmadu Bello University Zaria) should collaborate through the Textile and Fashion Design section of the Department of Industrial Design with the Zaria town dwellers who are pioneers of embroidery and seek to create a synergy between the department and Zaria embroiderers.
- The curriculum of the Textile and Fashion Design section of the above-stated department needs to be reviewed to incorporate embroidery designing and practice aside from theoretical knowledge.
- It will be a good step in the right direction to supply equipment to the section to enhance embroidery. In addition, staff can be sent for training in Computer-Aided-Design in embroidery to become adept in the art.
- Further research on this study or related studies is postulated.

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