

The Hausa Kingdoms

The Hausa are a people of the West African region of the Sahel. They continue to live in modern-day Northern Nigeria and northwestern Niger, and in the Middle Ages they formed a powerful and important alliance of African kingdoms with great influence over the sub-Saharan trade routes.

The Rise of the Hausa States

The first Hausa states began to develop in the Sahel around 500–700 AD. Gradually, seven principle city-states emerged—Biram, Daura, Gobir, Katsina, Kano, Rano, and Zaria—and they developed close trading relationships and economic cooperation. We know very little about these states or their cultures. Hausa legend claims that a man named Bayajidda, an Arab prince who traveled to the Sahel from Baghdad, was the forefather of the Hausa. He killed a monstrous snake that oppressed the people of Daura, and he married the queen. The queen had six sons already, and she produced another son with Bayajidda, and each of these sons ruled one of the seven Hausa city-states, becoming the first kings. The combined kingdoms of Hausaland were sometimes called the Daura, since Daura is the place where Bayajidda supposedly founded the Hausa people.

It is unclear how much history is preserved in the Bayajidda legend. The Hausa states may have been founded by Berber immigrants from north of the Sahara, or else by peoples coming from East Africa. Despite the story that Bayajidda came from Baghdad, for most of their early history the Hausa were polytheists; Islam was not introduced to the region on any discernible scale until the eleventh century.

Medieval Hausa Civilization

The Hausa kingdoms were first mentioned by Arab geographers in the ninth century, having become known for their role in trade. The seven Hausa city-states never unified, but they cooperated closely. Biram was the initial seat of government for the city-states, while Gobir provided soldiers and, since it bordered the rival empires to the west, protected Hausaland from foreign invasion. Kano and Rano grew cotton and produced textiles. They were also known for their valuable and beautiful indigo dye, which they used both for art and for dyeing their textiles. They traded these with the other Hausa states, such as Zaria, which provided slaves and grain. Katsina and Daura had direct access to the trans-Saharan caravans, and so traded the products produced in Hausaland for foreign goods, such as salt.

Islam was to become an important part of Hausa culture. The religion seems to have first appeared in the region around the eleventh century, brought by merchants and pilgrims, but conversion was slow. Kings and rulers were attracted to the new religion, perhaps for the prestige it granted them in the eyes of other great Islamic states. The common people only gradually adopted Islam, and generally practiced it along with ancient Hausa religious customs. Still, Arabic script was eventually adopted for writing the Hausa language. Muhammad al-Maghili, an Islamic scholar and missionary, is credited with converting the Hausa to Islam at the end of the fifteenth

century. It was probably around this time that Islam became firmly integrated into Hausa society, though polytheism would be common in the region until the nineteenth century.

The fifteenth century also saw the rise of one city-state over all the others. Kano became the most economically important city, thanks to its cotton cloth and dye industry. It provided most of the cotton to the western Sudan. Kano became one of the most important trade centers in all of Africa. It is the *Kano Chronicle*, a history of the city, that provides us with most of our information about early Hausa history.

The Decline of the Hausa Kingdoms

Besides the Hausa, another ethnic group lived in their lands: the Fulani. The Fulani were generally treated as second-class citizens and grew to resent Hausa rule. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a charismatic Islamic leader of Fulani background named Usman Dan Fodio, who lived in the state of Gobir, began a religious movement in the region. He preached the need for a purer form of Islam to the Fulani and the poorer Hausa. Although the leaders of Gobir initially supported him, they soon felt threatened and tried to have Dan Fodio assassinated. The attempt failed, and Dan Fodio declared a jihad against the Hausa state. Supported in the holy war by masses of unhappy Fulani and poor Hausa, Dan Fodio's "Fulani Jihad" first overwhelmed Gobir, and then the rest of the Hausa city-states. This was the beginning of the Sokoto Caliphate, called such because Dan Fodio made his capital at the city of Sokoto. The Hausa aristocracy was replaced by a Fulani aristocracy, but these new rulers quickly adopted much of Hausa culture. In some places, such as Kano, they began speaking the Hausa language instead of their native Fula language. The Hausa and Fulani mixed freely, and today the ethnic group is generally termed the "Hausa-Fulani."

Under the Sokoto Caliphate, the region was truly converted to Islam on a massive scale. The empire, ruled by theocratic caliphs at Sokoto, expanded throughout the nineteenth century. The rule of the Sokoto Caliphate lasted for about a century, until the British colonizers took over the region in the early twentieth century. The Hausa are to this day a major ethnic group, chiefly in Nigeria and Niger.

Summary:

- The first Hausa states began to develop around 500–700 AD, though we know little about how this happened aside from legend.
- Eventually seven main city-states emerged—Biram, Daura, Gobir, Katsina, Kano, Rano, and Zaria. Each played a different role in the confederation, providing goods or soldiers or access to trade. This allowed the Hausa states to become important in international trade.
- Islam first appeared in Hausa lands in the eleventh century, and by the fifteenth century it had become a powerful force, though it was still often practiced alongside traditional religion.

- The Hausa states were eventually overrun by the Fulani jihad in the nineteenth century and replaced by the Sokoto Caliphate, though much of Hausa culture was preserved in this state.

