

## THE IMAGE OF HAUSA SMITHS IN SOME WRITTEN SOURCES

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### *Introductory notes*

The social position of iron workers in so called primal societies, and especially in numerous ethnic groups of Africa, has long been considered as a special, if not ambivalent one. As masters of iron and fire who in olden days had to produce weapons to secure safety of their communities, and up to date to manufacture some indispensable instruments, they are not ordinary craftsmen like some other professional groups. The process of iron working has seemed to many peoples to have some magic properties and those who worked with iron were the object of special regard, in some cases favourable, in some others unfavourable one. In some places the smiths have been regarded as having high status and beneficial magical powers; in some others they have had a rather low social position, being placed outside the normal layers of the society and sometimes locked in endogamic groups known as castes.

In fact, G. BALANDIER (1968:181) is of opinion that nowhere in Africa they to occupy an intermediary position. This statement seems to be endorsed by G. SCHMITZ-CLIEVER (1979) who has collected in his book a vast amount of information from 134 different ethnic groups of West Africa and made a detailed examination of peoples attitude to iron workers and of their function in five selected societies, i.e. Mafa, Margi, Asna Natsafa, Dogon and Bambara.

It is evident from that work (and from some others) that the African smiths have even found their way into mythologies as they were believed to be in touch both with living people and living-dead as well functioning as intermediaries between both those categories and belonging simultaneously to this world and to the underworld, the case of Dogon being an example. According to popular beliefs of the Dogon people, their smiths are also to metamorphose and to take shapes of various animals and plants.

In Central Africa, in Kongo and Angola kingdoms, the rulers-founders of the states were believed to be gifted smiths. The smiths were regarded as possessors of special powers that made them close both to kings and to priests or sorcerers. In Eastern Africa the smiths occupied the high social positions as well and were held in esteem and feared.

*The position of Hausa smiths. State of research*

One is rather surprised to read in Polly HILL's book (1972: 212) that the literature on Hausa blacksmiths is extremely scanty. She informs that brief descriptions of smithing are provided in TAYLOR and WEBB (1932) and Ibrahim MADACI (1968), and that also NICOLAS makes references to the Hausa blacksmiths. For some reasons, however, she does not mention an article by N. ECHARD (1965) which - according to our knowledge - is the best one on that particular subject ever written. It will be the basis of our further consideration on the position and social status of the Hausa Moslem smiths as being portrayed in some written sources.

N. ECHARD has studied a group of Ader population known as *asnaa matsàafaa* "fetish worshippers" who continue to adhere to "animist" traditional religion and practice ritual sacrifices. They constitute an endogamous group which preserves the knowledge of the metallurgical techniques and religious (or rather religious-magic) practices that accompany the process of iron working.

*Asnaa matsàafaa* distinguish between *farfarun makèera* "white smiths", known also as *makèeran maataa* "women's smiths" and *bakàaken makèeraa* or "blacksmiths". The first ones do not know how to smelt the iron and are mainly occupied with producing of women's "jewelry".

People belonging to *baƙàaken maƙèeraa* group are not strictly endogamous and the marriages with non-smiths are quite often : they result, however, in further division of descendants into '*yan mazaa* "sons of mens", i.e. those who inherit smithing through the blood and are masters of the metallurgical techniques, and '*yan maataa* "sons of women", born of a marriage between a smith's daughter and her husband belonging to another occupational group. '*Yan maataa* usually become praise-singers for the blacksmiths and preserve some magical properties.

Both '*yan mazaa* and '*yan maataa* are under the control of *sarkin maƙèeraa* "chief blacksmith" whose office is a hereditary one. His main duty consists of providing the political chief known as *sarkin ƙasaa* with agricultural tools being collected at the beginning of rainy season from his fellow blacksmiths being under his authority.

The importance of *sarkin maƙèeraa* is being recognized on the eve of his nomination ceremony as well as on the eve of the annual Moslem festival known as *Tabaski*. On those particular days the political chief transfers his power to the chief blacksmith who for some hours rules symbolically the country.

The smiths of *asnaa matsàafaa* are usually named *maƙèe-ran tamaa* "those who forge iron ore" which implies that a real blacksmith should also know the techniques of iron smelting. Those techniques are also transmitted from the father to

his son(s). The process of iron smelting is being organized and supervised by sarkin zangòn tamaa "chief of smelting camp" who belongs to the lineage of the chief smith. It is also his duty to preside over some magic and religious ceremonies and to win the favour of a bush spirit before the smelting process starts (ECHARD, 1965:368-371).

'Yan maataa are also known as makàfa n ma k'èraa "praise-singers of the blacksmiths". Their main duty is - as it was mentioned before - to sing praises of 'yan mazaa, to encourage them in their work and, in fact, to accompany them in all the situations. Since those praise-singers perform to the musical accompaniment of jangling rings known as zarii, sometimes they are identified as màì zarii. From time to time, they are seen wandering from one street into another, performing and singing some licentious songs which make some erotic allusions. It is believed that no woman can touch their rings without a risque of some serious consequences like miscarriage or perturbation in menses or lactation.

Blacksmiths from Ader have an obligation to take part in some social ceremonies. For instance, sarkin mak'èraa, accompanied by his màì zarii, is usually present during the naming ceremonies as well as during wedding rites. What is even more significant, the craft of blacksmiths continues to be a repository of power for the social control. The blacksmiths are entitled to punish those members of the local community who have transgressed accepted rules of social conduct or violated

interdicts. But it is mainly 'yan maataa who used to punish evildoers, either in form of rawatsaa (i.e. by licentious narration performed publicly in the streets and ridiculing culprit's behaviour) or, in case of some serious crimes, by means of an "evil eye". Makàḍin maḵèraa makes use of a clay or wood statuette of the evildoer known as mùtum-mùtumii which is believed to cause death or madness of the culprit (ECHARD, 1965:368-71).

*The position of smiths in the Moslem Hausa society*

Among the asnaa of Ader there is a group known as asnaa mallamaawaa which is composed of peoples who have to some extent been islamised. It is still N. ECHARD that provides us with an interesting narrative on the origin of their smiths. In some villages, strongly influenced by islamic religion, people believe that the craft of iron working derives from ànnabii Nuuhùu, i.e. prophet Noah who is claimed to live in the vicinity of Mecca. He constructed a large piragua and used to spend a substantial part of his time in it. It is prophet Noah who supplied people with fire and taught them the iron working. Another version of that legend makes a prophet Jada the ancestor of all the smiths. He used to "hammer" iron with his own naked hands as he was believed to be invulnerable from the fire. Shortly before his death, he shaped some instruments being used in iron working and offered them to his descendants who

would not be able to continue that craft without them (ECHARD 1965:356ff).

Both versions of the legend are known to some Hausas from Nigeria, but we were not successful enough to find them attested in a written form. All the Hausa texts describing the smithing make distinction between two kinds of smiths noted by N. ECHARD in Ader. The only difference is that some other names are being also used for them, *i.e.* maḵèeran baḵii instead of baḵàaken maḵèeraa, and maḵèeran farii for farfarun maḵèera (MISCHLICH 1942:17; E.M. RIMMER and others 1978: 118). Maḵèeran baḵii, or blacksmiths are workers in iron. They used to forge farming and hunting implements, weapons and instruments being necessary in some other professions. Among their products one has to mention such things like fartanyàa "small hoe", garmaa "large hoe with blade", magirbii "sickle", addaa "matchet", takòobii "sword", màashii "spear", kyauree "iron door", gàatarii "axe", different types of knives (wuḵàaḵee), razors (asàakee) and scissors (àlmàkàsai). Every blacksmith must have a file for use in sharpening knives, matchets, axes, harvesters, spears, or anything else that has a cutting edge or is pointed (Ibrahim MADACI and others 1982: 59).

Maḵèeran farii or the workers in "white" metals make use of silver, copper, quicksilver, aluminium, brass and tin. They produce ornaments for women and saddlery, bridle and

other harness for horses, the best ones being found in Kano.

Musa HUSAINI MADABO (1979:9) distinguishes still another category of smiths known as makeeran kaafintà who combine metal working with some carpentry. In fact, some blacksmiths have also an adze and use it in making wooden handles so that their products can be immediately used by the customers.

The time of prosperity for blacksmiths used to begin with the first thunder groans in the east announcing the rainy season. It was - and to some extent continues to be - a time for farmers to purchase farming tools or to ask the blacksmiths to repair the old ones. Blacksmiths in rural areas were not paid in cash for their services. It is clearly stated in an account by Ibrahim MADACI and others (1982:60) :

When people living in rural areas want to make some metal implements, they go to the blacksmith or elsewhere to buy the metal required. This they give to him and explain what they want made and he makes it. Again if a man's hoe is broken or blunt or the handle is broken, or if a man wants a sicle, hoe harvester or an axe made or sharpened, he simply goes to the blacksmith, who will carry out the task required. But he will not be paid money until the harvest season when he will be invited to the farm and given a bundle of millet and of guinea corn. If a large family has a family blacksmith, they may give him three bundles each of millet and guinea corn, but the blacksmith undertakes all the smithing work of the whole family.



The harvest was also prosperous time for the workers of "white" metals. They were especially happy at the beginning of the millet harvest, and when the ground-nuts were dug up and gathered together in heaps. It is at that time women used to get money from their husbands and buy plates, bangles and ear-rings from the makèeran farii.

Both the account of Ibrahim MADACI quoted before, and some other sources indicate to the fact that not all the blacksmiths were engaged in iron smelting. In fact, it seems to us that there were special groups of iron workers known as màasu dafàa tamaa "smelters of iron ore". Numerous descriptions of iron ore smelting seem to point out that the process was quite similar to that described by N. ECHARD in Ader. Let us listen to an account by Alhaji UMARU which was written down by A. MISCHLICH (1942 : 167) :

If smelting process of iron ore is considered, people go to the stony, uninhabited country (rich in iron ore) and build some grass huts there. Then they built a big bin of clay and make an opening from above. At the bottom some holes are made : next the iron ore stones are put into the bin until it is full. Charcoal is prepared of kiryaa tree in great quantities and then the fire made at the bottom of the bin. It is blown up with bellows made of goat skin. When blowing up the fire, charcoal is added until the ore stones become bright red. It is the smelted iron that blacksmiths buy and use in smithing.

More detailed description of the iron ore smelting can be found in the book by E. M. RIMMER and others (1978). Sometimes the smelters have to find a proper iron ore in the bush. There are also some places renowned for the quality of iron being produced there. One of them is Kuriga town and the tools made of its iron ore are known as 'yan Kuriga - "made in Kuriga".

No account being considered here mentions any religious or magic ceremonies which could be performed before the iron ore smelting. Does it mean that the Moslem Hausa metal-workers have lost their old customs and a special position in their society ?

*The social status of the Hausa Moslem smiths*

Up to date the Hausa smiths have preserved some traits of an endogamous and caste society. Ibrahim MADACI (1982:59) is of opinion that the large majority of the blacksmiths have learned the smithing from their fathers. He makes a statement that although those are not born into blacksmith family can learn the craft, they rarely become experts in the business unless they have started learning it from an early age as do the children of the blacksmiths. It is also evident from some other sources that the smithing is -to some extent at least- a here-ditary craft. Polly HILL (1972:212) in her book describing Batarawa community in the Katsina emirate provides us with an information that there are three forges in that village owned

by three skilled men, each of whom is descended from a line of blacksmiths. The paternal grandfathers of two of them were brothers and the father of the third one had a brother who was a blacksmith. Two of them combine smithing with farming and although they are notable farmers (and heads of *gandàayee* - big communal farms) much of their selling is done from their forges which are attached to their houses. Each is assisted by a son or brother, who is paid for this work, and who is permitted to work on his own account where the forge is available.

When someone wants to acquire the art of smithing, he starts by learning how to use the bellows. If he masters it, he will be allowed to forge some small articles such like sickle, hoe, different types of needles and knives. Later on he can start to forge chains, doors, buckets and other items.

In the Hausa society, occupations can be inherited (*karda*) or freely chosen (*shigeegèè*, SMITH 1959:248ff). The word *shigeegèè* means "intrusion" and points to rather undesirable although permitted situation. The principle of the inheritance of function was, in olden days, strictly preserved. Until quite recently there was no access to such professions like smithing, weaving, pottery, butchery and tannery if not by inheritance. This situation tends to be modified, especially in the case of some new trades which are open to all.

Among the Hausas there is also an order of status known as darajàa, with màasu sarautàa (office-holders), mallams (Moslem learned men) and rich merchants on the top, and butchers, mat producers, calabash menders, drummers, praise-singers and... thieves at the bottom. Blacksmiths occupy an intermediate position, together with farmers, traders and other craftsmen.

The traces of an institution known as 'yan maataa (in the form described by N. ECHARD in Ader) can be found in an account of Baba from Karo (M.F. SMITH 1954:76 and 97), who was a Moslem woman and lived in the Hausa Moslem society. The relatives of her mother belonged to a family of drummers and blacksmiths. Her maternal grandfather was sarkin maƙ̀èra in Gwibi. Since Baba married a man from outside the blacksmiths' group, she became -according to N. ECHARD's classification- one of the 'yan maataa, i.e. professional praise-singers of the blacksmiths. Of course, Baba could not exercise her inherited profession because she changed her domicile and re-married three times. Still she was asked by her relatives to perform the blacksmiths' dance which she used to do with a tomato in her mouth symbolizing red-hot iron.

Blacksmiths strengthen their fires with the use of a pair of bellows made of goat skins which inject fresh air to the embers to keep them glowing. The forge fire is fed with charcoal from the ƙiryaa tree which has a very hard and highly caloric wood. Blacksmiths are believed to be ever

ready for any emergency : they are fully protected with charms against sharp and pointed instruments. Most smiths are also believed to have a secret antidote which prevents them from burning by fire. They display their invulnerability from fire during some public meetings as is described by Baba (M.F. SMITH 1954:97) :

The blacksmiths heat iron until it is red, red, then they play with it in their hands and against their bodies and heads until there is lots of smoke. They have magic, it doesn't burn them. The onlookers give them money.

Those qualities of blacksmiths are pointed out in praise-songs which honour them, that of Baba being an exemple (M.F. SMITH 1954:97) :

You eat fire bel bel, the blacksmiths game,  
 You eat fire bel, bel, the blacksmiths game,  
 Playing with fire, only the blacksmiths,  
 You sons of blacksmiths, you eat medicine  
 Only the blacksmiths can play with fire.

There is a special performance of blacksmiths known as wàasan cìn wutaa "play of fire consuming". The blacksmiths dance to the drum's rhythm their special skills in fire handling : they apply it to their heads or tongues, they take with hands a red-hot iron bar or put it into the mouth (Musa HUSAINI MADABO 1979:10).

A great solidarity exists between the blacksmiths. Even if their meet one unknown to them, they treat him like a brother. If one organizes a family feast, he invites all the

blacksmiths in the vicinity to take part in it. Sometimes however a great rivalry develops between them and they are said to try to bewitch each other, i.e. to render their protective charms ineffective. More often, the blacksmiths are believed to injure their enemies rather than their fellow rivals by nullifying their antidotes so that the fire burns them. They do not tell their magic secrets to anyone except their children, or a trusted servant who has served them for a long time (TAYLOR, WEBB 1932:213).

As it is evident from the account of Baba, farmers' daughters often married into the families of the blacksmiths. Farmers and blacksmiths liked to join their children in marriage. It provides an example of so called preferred marriage between occupational groups. But a real friendship of special kind links blacksmiths with Tuaregs. It is a healthy fun-poking relation between them. If a Tuareg gets to a Hausa town, in which he does not know anyone, he immediately asks to be taken to the nearest blacksmith's home to pass the night.

In olden days each local occupational group had a hierarchy of officials and title holders, similar to that of political organization of the Hausa chiefdoms. So besides sarki, the local head of a particular craft, there were *màdaakii*, *gàlàdiimàa* and others. Heads of professional groups were obliged to exact taxes from their subjects. In this century the majority of Hausa chiefdoms levied occupational taxes which is said to contribute to the fall of the professional

structures. In this way the blacksmiths also lost their minor political function still being in use among asnaa matsàafaa in Ader.

Hausa blacksmiths, like other craftsmen, cherish their dances, preserve their praise-epithets and are extolled by praise-singers. The praise-singers glorify iron, their main raw material, in an epithet that runs as follows :

Baƙin ƙarfe, bawa mai ƙunduttu.

Hey iron, you are a slave, a fool-hardy one.

Some of the blacksmiths, during the wàasan maƙèeraa (blacksmiths' play in which dunduufàa drums are beaten), or even during the hard smithing can evoke in themselves a sudden rise of emotion and chant their own kiraarii in a self-praise demonstration of prowess. Here is an ex. :

Sai ni baƙi, dodon ƙarfe, mai amana da maharba!

Sai ni na Kaka, gwani, ni na iya don kaina!

Da ba domin taya ba, da na yi mota!

Badon ni ba, da ƙasa ta yi saura!

Kai, ba don ni ba, da maza sun yi gizo!

Sai ni na Ali, gatan Kaka, mai abin mamaki!

Ƙarya ku ke, magauta,

Sai na gaji na bari don kaina.

(E.M. RIMMER and others 1978:116).

There is none like me, black one, goblin of iron, an ally of hunters!

There is none like me, that of Kaka, an expert, I know how to do for myself!

If I only had a tyre, I would forge a car!

If it were not me, the earth would become a disused farm.

Oh, if it were not me, the men would get a long, dirty  
and matted hair!  
There is none like me, that of Ali, a support for Kaka,  
the owner of a strange thing!  
You are telling a lie, you enemies,  
So I became tired and disregard you for my own sake.

When naming or wedding ceremonies are held in a blacksmiths compound, *màasu kidan dunduufàa* are usually present there and they give luster to the occasion by performing and singing the praises. The praise-songs are composed of the same elements as an ordinary one : they contain greetings and praises, subtle advices and admonitions, words of encouragement and thanksgiving for an expected remuneration. Here is a sample of a praise-song for blacksmiths in Kano-Warure town quarter :

Maƙeran Warure ba kasala,  
Babu gudu babu ja da baya,  
Kayan makamai irin na ƙira,  
Ku je ku Warure ba kasala.  
Kaya na noma irin na ƙera,  
Akwai fartanya akwai wuƙaƙe,  
Akwai takobi akwai su mashi,  
Akwai kibiyoyi irin na harbi,  
Akwai fartanya akwai magirbi,  
Barandami irin na yaƙi,  
Akwai su mashi irin na suka,  
Akwai fa adda irin ta sara,  
Wasan wuta akwai a Warure,  
Akwai fa wasa irin na ƙarfe,  
Matsoraci duk ya ja da baya.

(Muhammadu SANI Ibrahim 1983:68).



The blacksmiths of Warure are not devoid of energy,  
 There is neither running away, nor withdrawal.  
 As for the weapons which are forged,  
 You should go to Warure without delay.  
 As for the farming tools which are forged-  
 There are a small hoe as well as knives,  
 There are a sword and a spear,  
 There are arrows for shooting,  
 There are a small hoe and a sickle,  
 And a type of war hatchet as well,  
 There is a machet for chopping,  
 There is a play with fire in Warure,  
 There is a play of iron type,  
 All the cowards withdraw [when seeing it].

It is commonly believed that smithing belongs to male occupations. But there are some indications that, at least nowadays, some other family members are engaged in that craft. This is evident from a song being a large kiraari of the blacksmiths which was registered in Fika town on the Bolewa territory :

Kira barka da gajiya,  
 Kira barka da kwana.

Lalle babu Sarki sai Allah,  
 Tabaraka shi ne gwani.

Lalle Kira kama da kyau,  
 Kamar za ka yi arziki.

Baran maƙeri wuya,  
 Matar maƙeri wuya,  
 Gobe ɗauko wuta,

Jibi d'auko wuta,  
 d'auko, d'auko wutar nan  
 Ya fi noma gajiya.

Ka ji gwarzo, mai k'ira,  
 Da ya fi sauran wuya.

...Lalle k'ira ya mai da k'arfe  
 Kamar ruwan rijiya.

Babu mai kamar k'ira,  
 Aiki mai wasa da wuta.  
 (Mohammed YERIMA Idrissa 1985:41ff.)

Smithing, I hope you'll feel rested soon,  
 Smithing, good day to you.

For sure, there is no king except Allah,  
 Blessed one, He is an expert.

For sure, start smithing in a hard way,  
 As if you go to become prosperous.

Blacksmith's servant is suffering,  
 And blacksmith's wife is suffering as well.  
 Bring here fire tomorrow,  
 Bring here fire after tomorrow,

This constant fire bringing  
 Is more tiresome than the farming.

Do you hear, what a person of great energy, one who  
     forges,  
 He suffers more than the others.

...For sure, smithing makes liquid of iron  
As if it were a well water.

There is nothing like smithing,  
It is a work being a play with fire.

A blacksmith is in a constant need of help of his family members. They are mainly engaged in "bringing the fire" which may be interpreted as purchasing or producing the charcoal, bringing it to forge and operating the bellows to inject fresh air to the embers in order to keep them glowing.

### *Conclusion*

Enormous changes in the Hausa society like thorough islamization, the development of money economy, modernization, industrialization and urbanization have contributed to the substantial remoulding of the smiths' status in the Hausa Moslem society. The introduction of European articles such as knives, scissors, hammers, nails etc., have reduced the highly enviable, specialized position of the smiths. In olden days, the blacksmiths were dependent in their trade on the mined iron or pieces of metal from discarded metal implements. The introduction of scrap metal of different kind -abandoned cars, lorries, machines of all kinds, discarded railway sleepers, canisters, oil containers and others- caused the decline in production of some traditional items, from big iron town gates to small oil lamps. On the

other hand, there is a substantial increase in cold smithy, in which old canisters and other iron containers are used. The blacksmiths continue to forge some instruments, both for themselves and for some other occupational groups. They still forge knives, farming implements, bridles and stirrups, sickles, punches for leatherwork, needles for thatching, razors, adzes, axes for woodcarving, arrows and traps for hunters. Till present time they make use of such metal working techniques like hammering, lost wax, chasing (whereby the surface of metal is punched and engraved) and repoussé (in which thin sheet metal is hammered from the back to produce a raised design; HEATHCOTE 1977:32). Up to date, the blacksmiths occupy their own sections in the Hausa markets and attract numerous customers as they sell their articles at much cheaper prices than the salesmen of the European tools and instruments.

There are numerous indications to the fact that earlier the position of the Moslem Hausa blacksmiths was much more similar to that of present-day arnaa matsàafaa community in Ader. In other words, their special position in society was much better accentuated, therefore, they conformed closer to the social status of blacksmiths in other African ethnic groups. Their society seems to be much more endogamous and the blacksmiths used to inherit the trade from the fathers. They were (and are) believed to have some special magic powers. They eagerly guarded

their secrets, and told them only to their descendants and highly trusted servants.

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