

‘Gyartai’: Reminiscence of an Endangered Hausa Craft and the Nascent Alternative

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Abstract: Traditionally, Hausa people are industrious in nature as they engage in different forms of craft and occupations as economic activities, which help in the sustainability of both the mundane and spiritual life. These crafts and occupations are interwoven with one another, as one emanates as a by-product of another. *Gyartai* is a traditional Hausa craft that solely relates to and depends on the calabash, which is a product of farming. *Gyartai* entails mending broken calabashes meant for domestic utilities. The calabash has many domestic uses. It serves as food bowls, containers or dishes, *gidauniya* and *jemo*, in which the Hausa favourite delicacies, *fura da nono* and *tuwo*, were served respectively in the past. It also served the purpose of decorating the bedrooms of newly married brides, *danki*. Despite its numerous traditional uses, the calabash, by its nature, is fragile and therefore breaks easily if not handled with utmost care. To repair the broken calabashes, the services of the *gyartai* are sought after. With the overwhelming break away from the use of calabashes as household utensils and their replacement with plastic materials, the work of *gyartai* has come to a gradual halt, thereby endangering the craft and making it go into extinction. The exigencies of modern times have shifted the work of *gyartai*, mending broken calabashes, to the similar work of mending broken plastic household utensils as an emerging craft undertaken by poor and vulnerable female folk to make a living. This paper investigated this shift and the present trajectories. Through interviews and engagement with the practitioners of the crafts, the paper identified, among others, lack of patronage and the unsustainable nature of the craft, poverty and hunger as the motivating factors for the emergence of the changing form of *gyartai* in the Hausa peasant society.

Keywords: Gyartai, Reminiscence, Endangerment, Hausa, Craft, Nascent Alternative.

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Research Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The mainstay of the Hausa traditional economy has been agriculture, which encompasses crop production and animal husbandry. Output of the agrarian economy includes both food and cash crops. Calabash is one of the cash crops produced, though it is mainly cultivated in limited areas of the lower Zamfara valley, around Gummi, Gyalange and Gayari, presently in Zamfara State. The production area extends up to Girkau, Margai and Kebbe town, in Sokoto State, Nigeria. Gummi is the major market for trading in calabash throughout Nigeria. Other markets include Kebbe,

Gayari and Margai. It is from these markets that merchants transport the product to other markets as far as Cameroon, Chad, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali. The widespread nature of its chain of distribution in the West African sub-region is due to its cultural utilitarian nature. Bunza (2019) identified several ways by which the Hausa people make optimum utilisation of the calabash. These include, but are not limited to, agricultural work, in threshing and winnowing of grains after harvest; serving as dishes for food; being used in water transportation; and serving as ornamental or decorative items.

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Calabash, by its nature, is fragile and therefore needs to be handled with care. In the event of its breakage, the services of a *gyartai* are sought after. The work of the *gyartai* is to mend the broken calabash by stitching it using local tools and herbal thread *medi* obtained from the roots of deleb palm, *Borassus aethiopum* or dum palm, *Hyphaene thebaica*. However, with the introduction and influx of plastic bowls and other plastic household materials, coupled with their acceptability and the comparative advantage they have over calabash in terms of accessibility and affordability, the use of calabash as an important household utensil has greatly reduced. This has threatened the *gyartai* traditional Hausa craft, which is now facing endangerment, nearing extinction. The thrust of this paper is to highlight this Hausa traditional craft with a view to documenting it for posterity and describe how poverty resulted in the gradual shift from the historical association of *gyartai* and calabash to the emergence of a new form of association of *gyartai* with broken plastic bowls for mending. An adage says: "Necessity is the mother of invention". Broken plastic buckets, kettles, bowls, etc. are stitched with nylon thread to make them usable again. Is this a new form or variant of *gyartai* in Hausa tradition?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars have shed some light on the cultivation of calabash, *kwarya*. Worthy of mention is Sarkin Fada (2020), whose paper delved into calabash farming in Gummi. Bunza (2019) elucidated the position or place of calabash in Hausa culture as well as how it is portrayed in the different genres of Hausa literature. Bunza, (2019) further expounded that in Hausa tradition, calabash has tremendous uses as per as culture is concerned. He therefore elucidated over a hundred uses of calabash in Hausa cultural practices. Abdullahi (2020) has focused on the *gyartai* craft in Gummi and the impending threats it contends with. Dangulbi (2020) elucidated the *Aruguma* trade, which is basically the trade in calabash products across Hausa land. These papers did not directly touch on the craft of *gyartai* across the major calabash-producing areas and the threats of extinction, as well as the emergent alternative to the old-age craft; hence the need for reminiscing on the occupation and a peep into the nascent variety.

Calabash Cultivation: An Overview

It would be illogical to describe the *gyartai* Hausa craft without referring to calabash. This is so because without the calabash, the *gyartai* craft would not have been possible. The latter relies exclusively on the former. The area, largely known for calabash production, lies along the Zamfara River Valley, situated in the South-western part of Zamfara and Sokoto States, Northern Nigeria. The principal town for calabash cultivation is Gummi in Zamfara State. The production area includes, but is not limited to, Birnin Magaji, Iyaka, Falale, Gabtu, Gyalange, Bardoki and Gayari in Gummi

Local Government Area of Zamfara State. Other areas along the Zamfara River Valley include Girkau, Jabga, Gadacce, Margai, Kebbe and Umbutu in Sokoto State. In these areas, the crop is planted around the second quarter of August and extends to mid-September in the non-Fadama farmlands. In the Fadama area, planting may be extended up to the end of September. Depending on the soil moisture, the planted seed takes about a week or more to germinate. Two weeks after sprouting, the farmer ploughs or tills the ground around the seedling to make heaps of soil around it. This is known as *gidan kauli/gidan balli* in Hausa. What follows next is weeding the farmland about twice before the plant begins to bear fruit. The rounded fruits are continuously inspected, *jirkita*, and turned on a weekly basis to guard against the harmful effects of termites, rodents, and other pests. In modern times, insecticides are also applied to ensure good yield. By December or early January, harvest begins with the mature fruits. The ripe fruits are removed and processed first by using a knife to remove a greenish layer from their bodies to make them smooth; this is called *karkara*. A saw is then used to cut them into two halves, a process called *fafi/hwahi* in Hausa. Each split half is further processed by chopping the whitish inner shell of the seeds using a curved chisel, *gizago*, as a tool. This is called *cin toto* in Hausa. The next step, called *huri*, involves cleaning up the inside to give it a fine dressing. This is done using a curved knife-like instrument called *mahuri*. The product is then displayed in the sun to dry. The product is then taken to the market for sale or stored until around August, up to the ember months, when its price appreciates significantly due to a shortage of supplies at the market. The price per unit depends on its quality and size.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. The study explored one of the historical Hausa traditional crafts, which today is on the verge of extinction. The data were obtained using a random sampling of respondents from calabash-producing areas of the Zamfara River valley. The decision was informed by the understanding that the availability of a product makes its usage more prevalent than in areas with shortage or near absence of it. The sampled towns and markets were Gummi and Gayari in Zamfara State as well as Kebbe and Margai in Sokoto State. The researcher purposely used the market days of the sampled areas for interviewing the respondents because it is the day that the majority of the specialised *gyartai* attend the market for their masterpiece. Friday is the market day for both Gummi and Margai, while Tuesday is the market day for both Gayari and Kebbe towns. These markets were visited, and interviews were conducted with the practitioners of the craft. Personal observations on the practices and utilisation of both calabash and plastic materials were also made. Plastic materials bearing stitches similar to calabash mending were observed, and the people providing the service were

interviewed to derive insight into the practice. The data collected were thematically presented and analysed.

Gyartai: Definition and Cultural Overview

Etymologically, *gyartai* is a masculine Hausa noun. Bargery (1934, p. 430) said it refers to a calabash-mender. In essence, it connotes a person who mends a broken calabash so it becomes reusable. It also refers to an indigenous craft that is primarily concerned with the art of mending calabashes by making stitches along the broken part using the root of a local herb as thread. CNHN (2006, p. 186), however, stated that the word refers to the craft of stitching a broken calabash or anything made from calabash or it's like, for instance, the gourd. The *gyartai* craft is also called *gyatta-bari* in the Sokoto dialect of Hausa. It is categorized as one of the traditional small-scale occupations of the Hausa people (Sani & Aliyu, 2026 p. 39).

Most *gyartai* craftsmen are farmers; as such, during the farming season, they offer services to their clients in the evening after the close of work at the farm or at such a time when farm work is in recess. The practitioners of this craft ensure that they attend markets on market days in their surrounding settlements to offer their services to those in need. Their services include calabash mending and also fabricating or refurbishing spoilt water-drawing containers made from calabash. They mend broken gourds used for fetching water from the wells, *guga*, the fishing gourd, *gora* and other

household utensils like traditional flour sieves or sifters made of calabash or even water-drinking utensils, *moda*. However, on nonmarket days, especially during the dry season, the *gyartai* roams the crannies of a settlement of his choice, loudly chanting, advertising his presence and services. He continuously chants “*Gyartai! Gyartai!!, Gyartai!!!*” “Kowa kashe ya kawo!” (He who has broken calabash should bring it forth for a mend). The chants announce his presence and advertise his readiness to offer his services to whoever may require it.

Gyartai requires the use of certain tools, materials and instruments for effective and efficient services. He requires a sharp iron fin which has a wooden handle called *tsinke*. The instrument is used to perforate holes along the broken area of the calabash. He also needs *medi* or *kagi*, which are the deciduous roots of either the delep or dum palm trees. This serves as the thread for stitching the perforated lines of the broken area. The work also requires a foldable knife, which is used to cut the *medi* to the required length. A small gourd is also needed to soak the *medi* so that it is always damp or moist to prevent easy breakage. To make the stitches, the *medi* is inserted into the perforated holes on both the inner and outer sides of the calabash. The thread is tightened so much that the crack on the calabash sticks together to the extent that water can hardly pass through.

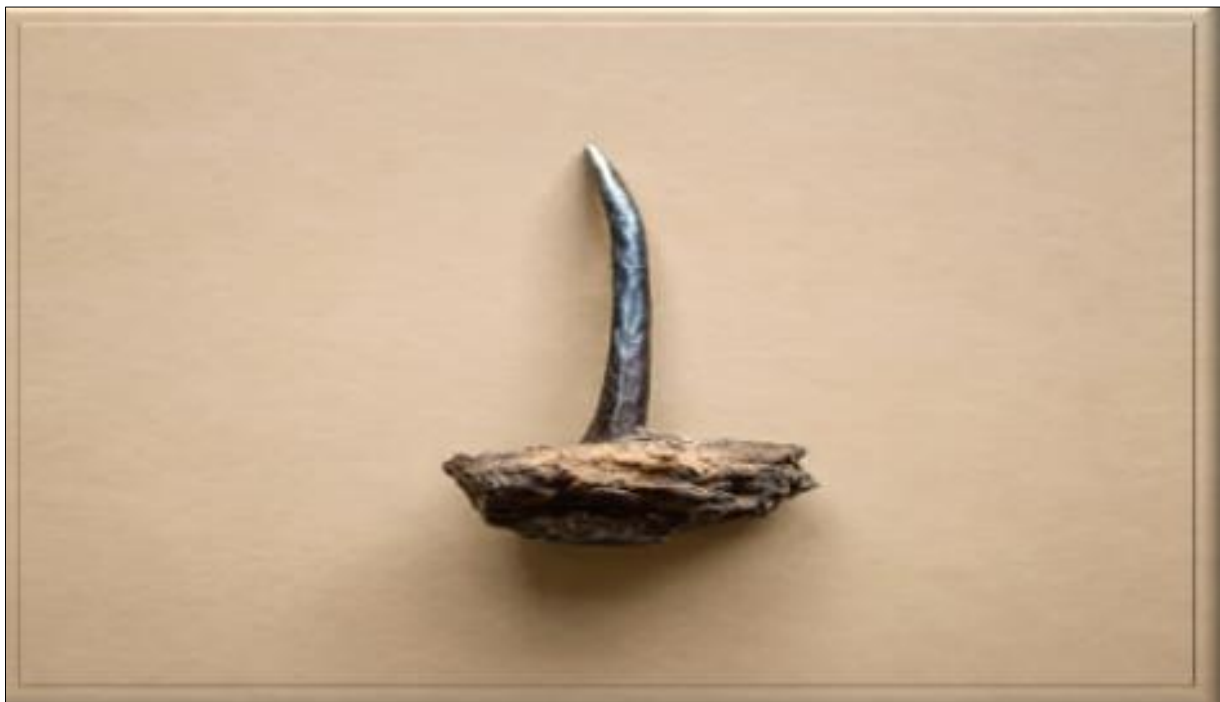
The tools necessary for the trade:



Medfi/Kagi (stitching thread)



Foldable knife



Tsinke

The *gyartai* craftsmen also undertake the making of calabash-made water-drawing containers from dug wells, *guga*. To make the *guga*, sticks of geza shrub are cut into the desired length. It is then bent so that it is fitted into the top inner sides of the calabash, one

stick across the other. The end of each stick is then stitched onto the calabash, using the *medi* or *kagi* thread so that it holds firmly on the calabash. It is then ready for drawing water both in the houses and irrigation farms.



Stitched calabash



Stitched calabash frame sifter

Culturally, the *gyartai* craft is looked down upon as a mean occupation of the commoner and the downtrodden members of the Hausa society. Bargery (1934, p. 430) has posited that “The trade of calabash-mending is considered the lowest or meanest trade”. This is so because, in the present economic realities of Hausa society, it is a trade whose proceeds or financial remuneration accrued from it is meagre enough to complement what is cultivated at the farm. It can hardly sustain or meet the financial obligations of its practitioners. Perhaps, this poor remuneration accrued from it may be one of the factors responsible for its endangerment. The cultural representation of *gyartai* craft is succinctly pointed out in the Hausa proverbs, *Karin Magana*. One of the *Karin Magana* says:

“A bar tuna baya, gyartai ya ci sarauta “

This may translate as: “From rags to riches.”

Another variant of the proverb is: “Gyartai ya ci sarauta ya ce ban da tuna baya”

The socio-economic status of the *gyartai* has had an impact on the current endangerment which the trade faces today. Practitioners of the trade are viewed as the downtrodden in society. As such, anyone among them who finds other ways of making a living, more lucrative and economically rewarding tends to make a shift. A good number of farmers interviewed have shown that the high drop in the cultivation of calabash as a cash crop has significantly affected its utilisation as domestic utensils. Information obtained from farmers and personal observation made around the Fadama areas along the lower Zamfara River valley, the major area for calabash production, testify to the fact that a significant number of calabash growers have now shifted to the cultivation of sugarcane, chilli, sweet potato, rice and other agricultural produce that are more rewarding than the calabash. This led to the scarcity of the product, which makes it a little more expensive than before. Considering its fragile nature, which makes it break easily, most households

drifted towards the use of plastic bowls, buckets, cups, eating bowls, plates and many more. Another reason is the comparative advantage plastics have over calabash in terms of durability and affordability. In addition, there is acceptability and usage of plastic materials as household utensils over calabash. Another factor is the accessibility of plastic in every town and village of Hausa land.

The researcher observed that in every village where calabash is produced, plastic material forms the major part of the utensils used for carrying out some chores like fetching water, washing, and bathing. In the towns, however, most of the households do not have any of the calabash products used. This explains the level of acceptance of plastic products among the Hausa people. This, therefore, is a great threat to the culture of calabash utilisation among the Hausa people, thereby causing *gyartai*, a craft of mending calabash, to gradually face extinction. Visits made to some calabash markets in Gummi, Gayari and Kebbe revealed few practitioners of the craft operating in the markets. In Gummi, the largest calabash market in Nigeria, for instance, only three *gyartai* practitioners were seen offering their services. In Gayari, whose market day is Tuesdays, only one *gyartai* could be seen. When interviewed, he revealed that he has been the only person practising the craft in the district. At Kebbe, data showed only two *gyartai* went to the market from the surrounding villages for mending services. Being these markets the principal calabash-producing areas, the presence of few *gyartai* revealed its great danger of extinction. This relatively showed that in the cities and towns where the use of calabash is minimal, the presence of *gyartai* and their services may not be tenable.

Mending Broken Plastics: The Emergent Variant of *Gyartai*

As pointed out earlier, *gyarati* as a traditional Hausa craft is facing endangerment. People, for various reasons, shifted to the use of plastic materials as household utensils to the detriment of the natural traditional product, the calabash. Plastic materials, though more durable than calabash, also get broken for reasons of misuse or accidental causes. In consideration of the socio-economic realities of the country, mending broken plastic utensils becomes inevitable. This is so because the wherewithal to make replacements may be difficult. The peasant and the downtrodden members of the Hausa society, out of desperation and ingenuity, thought of knowledge and cultural transfer to solve an impending problem. They came up with the idea of broken plastic materials so that it becomes reusable again, so that maximum benefit is achieved. This is done in one of several ways:

i. The Vulcanisation of Broken Plastics

The vulcanizers are artisans who essentially use heat to mend broken rubber and plastic materials. This artisan work is called *makaneza* in Hausa, which, of

course, is a corrupted version of the English word vulcaniser. What they do is insert a soldering iron into a fire or ember. When it is red hot, it is used to solder a piece of plastic or rubber onto the surface of the broken plastic utensil, either a bucket or bowl. The crack area is completely soldered to cover the cracks identified. This, however, is not similar to *gyartai*, as it makes no use of thread in the mending process. It is not even comparable to stitching in terms of durability. This artisanal work is usually undertaken by men of all ages but mostly youth and middle-aged individuals. Sometimes their workshops are situated along streets with scanty shade over their heads. They operate from breakfast time to evening when they retire home. Sometimes a couple of them do become mobile, roaming residential areas, offering their services to those who need it.

ii. The Cobblers

These are people whose primary craft is shoe mending. However, with increasing use of plastic utensils across low-income families, practitioners additionally undertake the repair or mending of plastic utensils. They go about it using synthetic leather and glue which firmly pasted on the crack or damaged area of the plastic. This effort is short-lived or of a temporary nature, as it is not very durable. Sometimes cobblers are found domiciled in their workshops, and whoever requires their services visits them. However, there are itinerant cobblers who roam the crannies of their settlements looking for clients who require their services.

iii. Stitching Broken Plastics: A New Form of *Gyartai*

Presently, there is a new wave of mending broken plastic household utensils, much like what is found in the real *gyartai* craft. The same tools are used as in *gyartai* craft. Principally, in place of *medi* or *kagi*. The root-based thread, synthetic nylon, is used as a thread to stitch the crack area of the broken utensil. To make the stitching easier, a strong pin is used to pierce the area around the crack in the plastic utensil. A synthetic nylon thread is placed into the exact pierced holes along the crack. A stitch is then made across the crack. The stitching is tightly made so that water may not permeate through it. This enables the plastic material to be up and running again.

Like the *gyartai*, plastic stitching is a craft undertaken by the peasants and the less privileged members of Hausa society. This emergent craft is mostly undertaken by women in their matrimonial homes. Data collected in the area of study clearly indicate that widows and their children form the greater percentage of the practitioners of this craft. Married women from poor families also undertake the craft to supplement family income. Though earnings accruing from the craft are meagre, they complement other sources of income to the family, to be able to make a subsistent living.

An adage says 'Necessity is the mother of invention'. The harsh economic situation, which the Hausa peasant had to contend with, led to the emergence of this craft. The low purchasing power of the peasantry does not allow easy and prompt replacement of broken

household utensils. This gave rise to a shift in the simple ingenuity of patching, soldering, and stitching plastic materials to make them reusable, even if it is for a short while, pending the time of possible.



Stitched Plastic Bowl: Outside View



Stitched Plastic Bowl: Horizontal View



Stitched Plastic Bucket



Stitched Plastic Bowl: Inner View

Research Findings

The study explored the historic Hausa craft, *gyartai* and its potential problem of extinction due to its endangerment. The paper has realised that the drawbacks in the production of calabash have led to a shortage of supply in the market. The farmers have shifted to the cultivation of more profit-oriented crops like chilli, tomato, sweet potato and dry season maize.

The shortage in the supply of calabash and the influx of plastic materials into the market necessitated a shift in the choice and acquisition of household utensils in favour of the latter. Like the calabash, plastic materials are also prone to breakage. The culture of the Hausa people does frown at recklessness in spending and utilisation of resources. Coupled with the low-income status, for several peasant households, replacement of

worn-out or broken items becomes a herculean task. As such, maximum utilisation is expected; hence the craft of mending spoilt or broken utensils becomes inevitable. The paper has brought to the fore the culture of resource management, which an average Hausa man is known for. It showed that Hausa people are not spendthrifts; they utilise resources to the fullest. This paper has also found the ingenuity of the Hausa people in the area of transfer of knowledge. Though most practitioners of these trades are not educated in the Western form, they have the instinct to even mend those items or utensils which are new and alien to their culture for maximum benefit. The paper has also highlighted how the Hausa people strive to make a living even if it involves taking part in menial jobs or providing services that have low income in return for them to be able to supplement their earnings in agricultural production, to which they are known. The

paper has also explicitly shown that Hausa culture is dynamic and changes which are inevitable are accepted wholeheartedly.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined Hausa craft, *gyartai*, and its risks of endangerment, which is inevitably facing extinction. Most youth dwelling in the towns and cities of Hausa land do not know or even hear of the word *gyartai*. Hausa society relegates the craft and the practitioners to the bottom of the ladder in terms of financial returns or gains accruing from the craft. Yet their work remains vital in the sustained exploitation and usage of calabash-related household utensils. Their work ensures a curb against wastage of hard-earned family resources which may be incurred in making unnecessary replacements when revitalisation of broken-down utensils is possible.

However, with the passage of time and a drop in the production of calabash, coupled with the availability and low prices of plastic materials, Hausa people shifted to the use of plastic materials for day-to-day execution of household chores. This poses a great threat to the *gyartai* craft, thereby pushing it into gradual extinction. Plastic utensils, like the calabash, are also fragile in nature and therefore breakable. With the low purchasing power of most low-income families, these families resort to mending damaged plastics becomes inevitable. The peasants, who cannot afford instant replacement of damaged plastics, resort to the ingenuity of mending plastics by way of patching the damaged area or soldering and the more enduring stitching of the

broken part, using synthetic nylon as thread. The question one may tend to ask is: Is stitching plastic utensils a disguised or new form of *gyartai*?

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