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**ANNE HAOUR and BENEDETTA ROSSI (eds),  
*Being and Becoming Hausa: interdisciplinary perspectives*. Leiden and Boston: Brill (pbk €75.00,  
\$107.00 – 978 9 00418 542 5). 2010, xvii+310 pp.**

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No ethnic group in Nigeria receives more queries about its origin and identity than the Hausa. Almost every other ethnic group is known, fixed, and often closed to outsiders. The Hausa, thanks to their language and their mobility, have been more difficult to define and identify by outsiders. The predominant understanding now among Hausaist scholars is that anyone who can speak the Hausa language is classified as Hausa—even if they deny being Hausa and insist on a more subterranean identity. This book adds to this ambiguity of the perceptions of researchers about the Hausa by reinforcing the view that the Hausa do not essentially exist as a distinct group, but only as a linguistic cluster—a statement often contradicted by quoted interviews with some of the respondents in the more empirical chapters. This ambiguity arises because two distinct issues are often merged into one: the first is on the origin of the *term* Hausa, while the second is on the origin of a people with distinct identity. The book approaches this from a multidisciplinary perspective with chapters from various researchers looking at the problem from a particular angle. However, of the twelve chapters in the book only three focus on the core issue of Hausa identity (Jaggar, Last, McIntyre). Others are descriptive studies of contemporary ‘Hausanness’, rather than matrices for understanding the evolution of this identity from historical or material perspectives. Thus the central core argument of the book is, as stated in the introduction, that ‘ethnicity does not reflect in any direct or simple way the historical origins and evolution of groups’ (p. 4); it is, instead, a ‘category of practice’ in which individuals make sense of themselves and where they live. Right away this imposes an etic framework on the book, with the assumption that such a framework accurately describes the cultural process of ‘being’ that categorizes a person into a particular group.

Within this context, the editors, in their lengthy introductory chapter, prefer to use the term ‘Hausa-speakers’, rather than ‘Hausa’, to reinforce the key notion of the central linguistic perspective—stressing language, rather than material culture—of the Hausa identity in the book. This is more so as the contributors to the volume ‘emphasize the nature of ethnicity as a social construction’ (p. 3). A considerable effort is also spent by various authors on the division within the Hausa-speaking societies of *azna* [*arna*, pl; *arne*, sing.] and ‘Hausa’, without paying attention to the fact that *arne* to a Muslim Hausa simply means a pagan, or in some urban areas (such as Kano, Nigeria), a person without an accredited religion. A Hausa who is not a Muslim is just as much an *arne* as any non-Muslim is to the Muslim Hausa—there is therefore no *arna* identity as separate from ‘Hausa’ identity, except for religious practices. If religion is not used as a sole variable of identity formation, then this division is trite within the context of searching for the essence of ‘being’ Hausa.

The twelve chapters of the book are clustered around three broad themes of identity, history and religion. However, the contributions of Philip Jaggard, Murray Last and Joseph McIntyre provide a broader platform for debating the concept of 'being Hausa' from historical and linguistic perspectives. Other chapters in the volume deal less with identity and more with the act of being, often revealing new interpretations that offer a new way of looking at either unearthed or previously extant material. Anne Haour's paper (Chapter 6) on Kufan Kanawa, a proto-Kano community, falls into this category of new interpretation, at least on the historiography of Kano. Haour focuses on published sources, themselves reliant on oral tradition, suggesting that Kano in Nigeria was founded by migrants from what became Niger. This clashes with similar published sources, again also relying on oral traditions, that indicate a different migratory trajectory to the establishment of Kano. Haour does not provide both sides of the argument, and in fact is often dismissive of other arguments that trace the founding of Kano to Abagayawa.

Despite this, *Being and Becoming Hausa* is well written, with tight, often taut arguments about the variables that constitute the hallmarks of identity in a contemporary African society that cuts across borders of nations. The introductory chapter alone is worth the book in its efforts to synthesize the myriad arguments and perspectives about Hausa historiography and language, if not culture. There are flaws here and there that reflect the selectivity of the editors. But one does not have to agree with all the arguments presented about what constitutes being Hausa to salute the book as a well-assembled compendium of arguments on the issue of Hausa societies that will provide a basis for further debate.

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