

# ASPECT OF FULANI CULTURE IN KATSINA STATE, NIGERIA: CALABASH MAKING AMONG THE FULANIS OF DANJA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA.

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## Abstract

*This paper looks at calabash carving, use and the significance among the Fulani of Danja Local Government Area of Katsina State. The main focus of this paper is to document the processes involved in the production of calabash a craft that is fast being relegated among the Fulani people of Danja area using the direct observation method, oral history and consultation of documentary sources. The paper also addresses the techniques, functions and relevance of calabash to the Fulanis of Danja and environs. It is also the aim of this paper to discuss the aesthetics of the people which are communicated via decorations on the calabash. The paper in the end looked at their sources of inspiration.*

**Keywords:** Calabash, Fulani, Production, Decoration and Functions.

## Introduction

The Fula people or Fulani or Fulbe- numbering between 20-25 million people in total, are one of the largest and widely spread Muslim ethnic groups in Sahel and West Africa. The Fula people are traditionally believed to have roots from the people of North Africa and the Middle East who later intermingled with the local West African ethnic groups. As an ethnic group, they are bound together by the Fula language (Fulfulde), culture, history, religious affiliation and their efforts to spread Islam in the Sahel region and West Africa. There are many names (and spellings of the names) used in other languages to refer to the Fulbe. Fulani in English is borrowed from the Hausa term. Fula from Mandingo languages; is also used in English and sometimes spelt as Fulah or Fullah. Fula and Fulani are commonly used in English, including within Africa. While the term Fallata, fallatah or Fellata are of Kanuri origins and are often ethnonyms by which Fulani people are identified in Sudan.

The Fula people are widely distributed across the Sahel from the Atlantic Coast to the red sea, particularly in West Africa. The countries where they are present include Mauritania, Ghana, Senegal, the Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Niger, Chad, Togo, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Liberia and as far east as the red sea in Sudan and Egypt. The Fulas are either a significant or a minority ethnic group in nearly all countries they live in, alongside many also speak other languages of the countries they inhabit, making many Fulani bilingual or even trilingual. Such languages include

Hausa, Bambara, Wolof and Arabic. There are generally three types of Fulanis based on settlement pattern viz; the Nomadic/Pastoral or *Mbororo*, the Semi-nomadic and the Settled or "Town Fulani" the Pastoral Fulani move around with their cattle throughout the year. Typically, they do not stay around for long stretches (not more than 2-4 months at a time).

This research is conducted among the Fulani people of Danja. Danja is among the thirty-four (34) Local Government Areas in Katsina State. It is located in the southern part of Katsina State and it is close to the border, between Katsina State and Kaduna State. Danja is dominated by two major ethnic groups; Hausa and Fulani. The major religion of the people is Islam and they engage in several crafts practices such as; pottery, wood carving, calabash making, blacksmithing among others.

Calabash is from a fruit of a commonly known tropical tree known as calabash tree (*Crescentiacujete*) of the Bignonia family. This fruit (especially the shell) has been widely used by different societies as containers for different purposes in the past and also among contemporary societies. Calabash carvings have been associated with virtually all the cultural groups in Nigeria and Africa at large. This might probably be because calabash carving entails a relatively small technique and also the Nigerian climate and soil favours the growth of calabash (gourd). The calabash has been used for different purposes ranging from house beautification, religious, ritual, and domestic purposes. We cannot say for how long calabash has been in use due to its organic nature, as such, it is almost impossible to find it present in the archaeological record. But because it grows naturally and that very little modification from its natural form renders it useful, calabash may have been in use by different cultures in different parts of Nigeria and Africa at large for several thousands of years ago. Among the Fulani people of Danja, the calabash serves different purposes, unfortunately, its production is dying out. Thus, using direct observation, oral history, and written sources, the researcher intends to describe the art of transforming this vegetal resource into exquisite things of aesthetic worth and socioeconomic consequence.

### **General Background of Danja**

Danja is located about 56km away from Zaria. The distance from Danja to the headquarters of Katsina State (Katsina town) is about 180km. It is geographically located on latitude 11° 23'N and longitude 7° 34'E. It covers an area of 501km<sup>2</sup> (Mortimore, 1970). Danja is bordered by Funtua to the west, Bakori to the North, Kafur to the Northeast and Zaria to the south.

The vegetation of Danja is the Sudan savannah type, characterized by sand blowing winds; short grasses of about 1 to 1.5 meters, and scattered trees (Mortimore, 1970). The mean annual rainfall in the area is less than 1000 millimetres, which is experienced in four months of the year from around May to September. The community experiences dry and wet seasons annually. This depends largely on the interplay between two air masses, that is, the Tropical Continental (TC) which blows from the North-east with its

origin from the Sahara Desert, and the Tropical Maritime air mass (TM) which blows from the South-west down to the North with its origin from the Atlantic Ocean. These two air masses from the inter-tropical discontinuity in their boundary bring about the subsequent weather in the area, (Mortimore, 1970).

The Flora cover includes locust bean (*Ceratonia siliqua*), Shea-butter (*Bityrospermum parkii*) 'Kadanya' in Hausa, tamarid (*Tamaridus india*) among others. Some of which grow singly or in colonies while the grass species are mostly the Pennisetum (Pedicellum), which are mostly scanty in number and thicker in areas closer to river courses and other water bodies in the area. The community normally puts these plants into various uses which include medication, source of food, sources of fuel and forage for feeding animals.

Danja is part of Northern Nigeria that is characterized by the Precambrian basement complex hill with crystalline rocks (Grant, 1978). Some great depressions around Danja are caused by soil extraction for construction purposes, especially toward the northern and western parts of the area. Danja is characterized by small strands of rocks, specifically the igneous type that is, quartz which is usually embedded with gneiss and magnetite. There are also lateritic rocks found in some parts of the area. The soil type in Danja is sandy and loamy, a little leached and relatively easy to cultivate. However, the soil can also be described as semi-drought especially during the dry season. The community utilizes the fertile soil for crop cultivation and also in constructing mud blocks for traditional architecture.

The history of the people of Danja has been attached to the story of two brothers, Danja and Dabai, who came from Dayi village in Malunfashi Local Government Area. Oral tradition has it that the two brothers were roaming with their herds in search of green pastures. They came across an area filled with green grasses and decided to settle there because of the availability of abundant pasture to feed their animals. The two brothers lived together in the area with their families for some years before Danja decided to move some kilometres away from the area as a result of a little misunderstanding between the brothers, (Danja and Dabai). The area where the two brothers first lived together is now called Dabai, and the area where Danja moved to is now called Danja (Garba Pers. Comm. 2016).

Danja finally decided to settle in his new area and was later joined by other people who were also attracted to the area because of the fertility of the soil. As a result of this, the population of the area began to increase with people migrating to the area from different angles and regions of the North, such as Sokoto, Jigawa, Kano, and from other areas within the present-day Katsina State (Garba Pers. Comm. 2016).

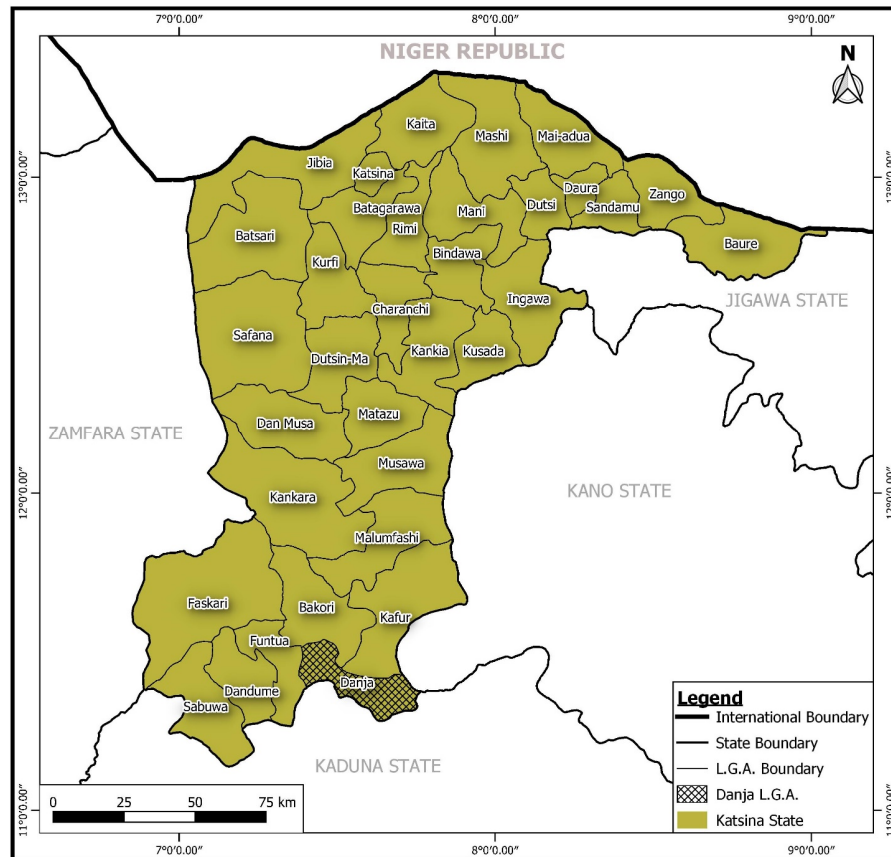


Figure 1: Map of Katsina State highlighting the Study Area

### Process of Calabash Carving in Danja

In Danja, the calabash is normally planted during the rainy season, and it takes about 3 to 4 months before it becomes ready for use. Calabash undergoes some processes to become household utensils like bowls, cups, water containers, serving bowls among others, not only for domestic uses but for religious and other cultural purposes too. When the calabashes are ripe for harvesting, those that are to be used are gathered. After the calabashes are gathered, some communities usually soaked them in water for several days until the seeds are rotten. However, this is contrary to what is done by the Fulanis of Danja. Among the Fulanis of Danja, the calabash is not soaked in water, instead, it is allowed to dry sufficiently before it is worked upon, but they are not allowed to be too dry so that they can be easily divided (Kabiru and Aminu, Pers. Comm. 2016).

The first step in calabash carving involves dividing the calabash into two equal sizes. This is a major task that requires some technical expertise and experience because some expertise skills are required before the calabash can be equally divided. A line is usually drawn across the calabash as a guide, the line is often drawn using a needle or a nail, sometimes a knife or

saw can also be used for the task. The line is then followed with a tool known as *zarto* in Hausa (small saw) to cut or divide the calabash, and another tool called *gurunji* is used to separate the calabash into two equal sizes (Kabiru, Pers. Comm. 2016).



**Plate 1: Tools for Carving Calabash**

After the calabash has been separated, a tool called *mahuri* is used to scrape out the seeds inside the calabash to produce a hollowed container. After the seeds have been scraped out, a tool called *magoji* (sandpaper) is used to smoothen the inner hollow of the calabash to make it smooth and beautiful; the edge that was cut is also smoothened with the sandpaper (Kabiru, Pers. Comm. 2016).

After the processes are completed, the calabash can be put into direct use. There are different sizes of calabashes, and these sizes determine the functions of the calabash in most cases. The difference in calabash sizes is determined by the nature of the seed planted (Kabiru and Ahmad, Pers. Comm. 2016).



**Plate 2: Calabash Carving in Progress**



**Plate 3: Finished Products**

After the processes of the cutting and scraping-out of calabash are concluded the next stage is the decoration of the calabash. The decorations done on the calabash by the Fulani men, and sometimes women are the manifestation of the Fulani's artistic ideas and they can be said to symbolize certain important aspects of the Fulani life and world views. The decorations and choice of symbols and signs on the calabashes reflect the passion with which the Fulani have worked out their relationship with nature and the universe. They also reflect their ideas of God, family, fertility, social ranks, their mode of life, and their ideas about the surrounding environment they live in (Muhammad and Bello Pers. Comm. 2016).

All the designs made by the Fulanis in Danja are combinations of various abstract motifs like cycles, squares, triangles, and lines sometimes

simple or wavy (see plate 4). Some of these geometric motifs are reproduced on the walls of their huts. The Fulani carvers derive their inspiration from their environment, their lifestyle and their general idea about life. Thus, their inspiration comes from within them, the environment they find themselves and the kind of life they are living.



**Plate 4: Scrapped and Decorated Calabash**

However, calabashes can be decorated by several techniques or methods. There are varieties of designs and patterns which calabash carvers carry out for calabash decorations. These are achieved by applying the following main techniques or methods namely, scraping, carving, scorching; pyro-engraving and pressure-engraving (Muhammad and Aliyu, Pers. Comm. 2016). The techniques used by the Fulanis of Danja include carving, scraping and painting. However, sometimes two techniques are adopted together for example carving and painting or scraping and painting.



**Plate 5: Process of Calabash Decoration**

### Types, Functions and Cultural Significance of Calabash among the Fulani's of Danja

Calabashes, whether decorated or not, serve various purposes in the daily lives of the Fulani. The types and functions of calabash are numerous, thus can be seen as follows:

**Koshiya:** this is a small-sized calabash measuring 15-20cm in diameter, it is used as a container for serving food, it is also used for other domestic activities like washing of rice *Koko:* this is another small calabash a bit larger than the one mentioned earlier. It is used for collecting diary milk from cattle. In most Fulani settlements in Danja, diary milk can only be collected from cattle using calabashes, thus no Fulani woman is allowed to go near the cattle to collect milk using any container apart from calabash. However, among Fulani's elsewhere, women are allowed to collect milk from cattle using other containers such as plastic and rubber containers (Haj. Yafendo and Abdulkarimu, Pers. Comm. 2016).

**Gidauniya:** this is a large calabash container measuring up to 40cm in diameter; it is mostly used by Fulani women in trading milk. Therefore most calabashes of this size are decorated because the decorated calabashes are the ones mostly used for trading milk. Apart from its commercial function, this type of calabash also serves as a container for domestic uses such as storing grains.

**Banbalasta:** this is a little larger than the *Gidauniya* it measures about 50-60cm. this type of calabash is used for various purposes ranging from conveying grains from farms to homes, it is also used for carrying water. Another great important use of this type of calabash is for bathing newborn babies. Whenever a Fulani pregnant woman is close to delivery, they normally seek a new calabash of this size and reserve it for when the new baby is born, the calabash is then be used for bathing the baby. It is culturally believed among the Fulanis of Danja that any newborn baby bathed in a new calabash container will grow up healthy and good looking.

**Ludayi:** these are small-sized calabashes with spoon shapes, and they are normally used for drinking *fura* and other liquid substances. That is; they serve the purpose of a spoon.

**Kurzumu:** this is another small-sized calabash measuring 15-20cm, this type of calabash is special and it serves a special function. The surface of this calabash is rough with rashy spots, it is always undecorated (see plate 8). This calabash is produced especially for soaking some traditional herbs (traditional medicine). It is believed among the Fulanis that some herbal medicines can only serve their medicinal purpose or function when they are soaked in this type of calabash (Haj. Yafendo and Aisha, Pers. Comm. 2016)



**Plate 6: Kurzunu Form of Calabash**

As mentioned earlier, calabashes whether decorated or undecorated serve various purposes in the daily lives of the Fulanis of Danja. However, apart from the artistic function of decorated calabashes, they also serve ritual purposes. There is a traditional ritual associated with many past Hausa and Fulani communities called *Bori*. A particular spirit in this traditional practice is called '*Yar Fulani* meaning "a Fulani woman". In the past, when the attention of this particular spirit is needed, finely decorated calabashes are arranged on the ground to honour her presence. However, this practice is no longer associated with the Fulanis of Danja; as such much cannot be documented about the practice (Malam Fatima, Pers. Comm. 2016). The most outstanding cultural significance of calabashes among the Fulani's of Danja can be seen in their use as containers in fulfilling practical functions in day-to-day activities among the Fulani women.

In summary, different sizes of calabashes are used for multiple purposes among the Fulanis of Danja area especially in carrying out domestic activities. The decorated calabashes are highly revered and are used for aesthetic display. For the Fulani women, decorated calabashes serve as tools in the trade of dairy milk; this is because it helps to attract customers therefore it serves some economic functions. Because of the value of the decorated calabashes the Fulani women consider them as worthy presents to their daughters during marriages.

## **Discussion**

Calabash production in Danja is now declining at an alarming rate. The decline is due to a decrease in calabash consumption. The usage of calabash has gradually been phased out in favour of the use of plastic containers. Even the Fulanis who are known so well for the use of calabash in their milk trade are now gradually adopting the use of plastic bowls for their commercial activities instead of calabashes. In Danja presently, only a few households are still using calabashes as domestic containers. It is a known

fact that in the past calabashes were used as containers for virtually all domestic activities. According to the calabash carvers in Danja, the reduction in calabash carving came as a result of the decline in calabash usage by the Fulanis. The Fulanis are the major calabash users in Danja, especially in its use as containers for trading milk. One of the major reasons for this decline in calabash usage can be seen in the introduction of plastic and rubber containers. These containers are sometimes more preferred than calabash because they come in different sizes and shapes which are cheaper, more standardized and lasts longer than calabash.

This decline in calabash usage left the calabash carvers with no option but to reduce their level of productions. The calabash containers failed to compete with plastic and rubber containers. Western/formal education also contributed to the decline in the production of calabash, because younger generations prefer going to schools than participating in the craft practice. However, there are some considerable numbers of Fulanis in Danja who prefer using calabash containers, especially in trading milk because according to them, calabash containers have some natural flavour that adds some pleasant taste to milk stored in them. Also, plastic containers easily absorbed heat from the sun, thus, making the milk spoil easily, while the calabash containers are more preservative because of the thickness of their wall making the milk stay longer (Haj. Yafendo, Pers. Comm. 2016).

The carving and use of calabash containers have not gone completely into extinction despite the challenges faced by the calabash carver and the introduction of other containers which have become substitutes for calabash containers. This is due to the high esteem the Fulanis in Danja hold the calabash; they consider it the only container worthy of milking their cattle and as gift items for a newlywed bride to take with her to her new home. The fact that milk kept in calabash lasts longer than the ones in plastic containers and has a better flavour has also kept the carvers in business and the craft alive.

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