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“The ‘Birmingham of Africa’: *Analyzing the Smelting Pits of Kano as a Hub for 19th-Century West African Armaments*”

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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FEATURE
IMAGE

This museum houses artifacts of Kano’s cultural and industrial past, which likely include ironworking and historic metal objects, a good background image.

Photo credit: Kano History Museum,

Gidan Dan Hausa by Jonathan Riddell via Wikimedia Commons

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"THE 'BIRMINGHAM OF AFRICA'"

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By the nineteenth century, Kano, one of the principal cities of the Sokoto Caliphate had become one of the most important industrial centres in West Africa. Its extensive blacksmithing, metalworking, and smelting industries earned it the nickname "The Birmingham of Africa," echoing the English city known globally for metal production during the Industrial Revolution....

These are historic weapons displayed at the Gidan Makama Museum in Kano, used during colonial conflicts and reflecting Kano's martial past. Photo credit: Uncle Bash007 via Wikimedia Commons.

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01

Historical Background

- Kano within the Sokoto Caliphate

Kano became part of the Sokoto Caliphate after the Fulani Jihad of 1804–1808. It was transformed into a large urban centre with a population surpassing 50,000 by the mid-nineteenth century. The

caliphate's political stability and strong demand for weapons created an environment in which metalworking flourished. The emirate structure allowed craft guilds (*kungiyoyi*) to organize production efficiently, while trade routes connected Kano to Bornu, Niger, the Hausa Bakwai ("Seven Hausa States"), and further west to the Sahel and Senegambia.

- Pre-nineteenth-century Ironworking Traditions

Before the nineteenth century, Hausa societies already possessed a long-standing tradition of iron smelting. Archaeological research by Haour shows that Hausa regions used clay furnaces, high-carbon bloomery techniques, and charcoal-based forging for centuries. These metallurgical foundations made Kano well-prepared to absorb innovations in weapon craft, including new blade designs, gun parts, and horseshoe production required for cavalry.

02

The Smelting Pits of Kano

- Structure and Operation of the Pits

Kano's smelting pits often located in specialized districts such as Kofar Wambai, Kurmi Market, and Kofar Mata were deep clay-lined furnaces designed to maintain intense heat. They utilized:

Charcoal as the primary fuel. According to ethnographic descriptions referenced in the Ironworking in Africa article, similar bloomery furnaces across West Africa produced wrought iron blooms through repeated heating and hammering. Kano's version was especially efficient, capable of supporting high-volume production.

- Guilds and the Organization of Labour

Kano's metalworking guild known locally as *makera* was one of the most organized craft systems in the caliphate. Membership was

hereditary, while workshops were clustered into districts supervised by a guild head (Sarkin Makera). Scholars such as Adeleye argue that these guilds were essential for regulating quality, apprenticeship, and pricing, much like European craft guilds during the same period.

Historic gate in Kano's defensive walls these fortifications were part of the city's strategies against invasion and reflect craftsmanship involving metal components (including iron reinforcement). Photo credit: Ancient City Gates of Kano Kofar Kabuga by Dan usy via Wikimedia Commons.

03

Kano's Armament Industry

· Production of Indigenous Weapons

Kano's smelting pits supported a robust armament industry that produced:

Horse gear including stirrups and bits. These weapons supplied not only Kano's own cavalry but also warrior groups across the Sokoto Caliphate and neighboring states. Historical evidence suggests that Kano-made blades were highly valued due to their strength and workmanship.

· Production of Gun Components

Although complete firearms were often imported from North Africa or Europe, Kano blacksmiths manufactured:

Barrel reinforcement rings. Firearm article explains that early African gunsmiths frequently repaired matchlocks and flintlocks rather than producing entire barrels, due to the high technical difficulty of boring long, smooth tubes. Kano's workshops nonetheless grew skilled in adapting imported weapons to local needs, reinforcing barrels, and crafting custom parts for hunters and cavalrymen.

Economic Networks and Trans-Saharan Trade

- Integration into Regional and Long-Distance Trade

Kano's reputation as the "Birmingham of Africa" was partly due to the city's integration into extensive trade networks. Caravans carried iron weapons from Kano to regions such as Bornu, Zinder, Katsina, Timbuktu, Nupe and Ilorin and Northern Cameroon.

These trade routes, noted in the Trans-Saharan trade article and confirmed by Lovejoy, facilitated the exchange of metal goods, textiles, slaves, and salt. Iron and weapons from Kano were essential trade commodities, strengthening the city's economic base.

- Military Demand and State Patronage

The Sokoto Caliphate's military campaigns increased demand for weapons. Emirs regularly commissioned large quantities of spears, swords, and horse gear. State patronage guaranteed steady employment for blacksmiths, while taxation revenues were partly derived from metal goods sold in the Kurmi Market, one of West Africa's largest precolonial markets.

Historic photo showing the Emir of Kano on the march with cavalry useful for situating Kano's martial traditions and armed forces. Photo credit: Public domain/ Wikimedia Commons.

05

Technological Innovation and Adaptation

- Improvements in Furnace Efficiency

Better air circulation systems in furnaces,

Introduction of taller furnaces for larger iron blooms.

These innovations were influenced partly by regional diffusion from Bornu and Nupe metallurgists. The Bloomery article confirms that furnace improvements across Africa often came from local adaptation rather than foreign transfer, showing Kano's ability to innovate independently.

- Hybridization of Weapon Design

Kano blacksmiths incorporated external influences such as Tuareg blade shapes, Saharan decorative motifs, and Ottoman-influenced metal fittings into local designs. This hybridization made Kano weapons recognizable and highly marketable across West Africa.

06

The Decline of Kano's Smelting Industry

- Colonial Disruption

The arrival of British colonial rule in 1903 severely disrupted Kano's metal industry. Colonial authorities imposed:

Restrictions on local armament production,

Importation of cheap European steel products,

Reorganization of markets. Scholars like Hogendorn argue that colonial policies intentionally weakened indigenous industries to favour imported European goods.

- Transition to Other Crafts

Although armament smelting declined, Kano's artisans shifted toward:

Local crafts for export. Thus, the legacy of Kano's smelting pits continued in altered forms, sustaining the city's reputation for craftsmanship.

Kano's designation as the "Birmingham of Africa" was not a colonial exaggeration but a recognition of its vibrant nineteenth-century metalworking industry. Using bloomery smelting pits, highly organized guilds, and extensive trade networks, Kano emerged as a major hub for arms production in West Africa. The city's blacksmiths combined indigenous knowledge with external influences to produce high-quality weapons and tools that powered the Sokoto Caliphate's military and economic systems. Even after colonial suppression, Kano's metallurgical tradition remains central to its cultural identity, serving as a testament to Africa's sophisticated precolonial industries.

This museum houses artifacts of Kano's cultural and industrial past, which likely include ironworking and historic metal objects, a good background image. Photo credit: Kano History Museum, Gidan Dan Hausa by Jonathan Riddell via Wikimedia Commons

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