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TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BIDA BRASS WORKS

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Abstract

Indigenous technology represents has been a major feature of African society since a long time. Indeed, technology was an integral part of traditional knowledge and native intelligence in many pre-colonial African communities. In many societies in Nigeria, indigenous technology is central to the productive activities of the people by providing tools to support local industries on one hand, and supplying various fabricated items of needs for commercial exchange. The technology is quite pervasive as it represents the peculiar ingenuity and creativity of the variety of cultural groups in the country. This study examines the trends in the development of the indigenous brass making in Bida, a city in Nupeland, central Nigeria. The study adopted a historical research method with a blend of primary and secondary sources. Since the pre-colonial time, Bida has been noted for its valuable brass wares such as bowls, trays, ceremonial regalia, and religious artifacts. Apart from satisfying local demands, these items also attracted merchants from different parts of Nigeria, making the city of Bida a strategic destination for the trade since the pre-colonial period. The brass industry represents a major cultural identity of Bida society, which survived colonial influence and been a major source of employment and revenue for many, including youths and the elderly. The craft has grappled with a number of challenges including lack of financial support, rural-urban drift and competition from imported and more sophisticated items. In spite of these challenges, the Bida brass has remained active supplying ornamental wares, home utility items and potentials in tourism.

Keywords: Bida, indigenous technology, brass work, indigenous knowledge, innovation.

Introduction

Manufacture of implements has been a major aspect of the productive economy of the Nigerian peoples since the pre-colonial period. Smiting is an important industry that provides support for other productive sectors of the indigenous economy such as farming, sculpturing, carving, tanning, fishing as well as security and warfare. The smiths made use of various materials ranging from iron, to bronze and brass. The strive to manufacture more durable implement necessitated the continuous search for stronger raw materials like alloy metal such as brass, which is an alloy of copper and zinc (Bayley, 2000). Brass here is also used to connote the finished products of metallic alloy such as brass pots, cups, bangles, staffs, ornamental swords, spears, and other decorative objects. Indeed, in the later period, due to its durability and light weight, brass became a major essential material in the manufacture of astronomy and navigation instruments (Abdullahi Massaba, 2025)

The use of brass in the manufacture of implement was popular among some communities in pre-colonial Nigeria. These include the coastal communities and riverine areas, specifically in the old Cross River basin, and the Ibibio and Efik of the present-day Akwa Ibom and Cross Rivers States. Indeed, brass rods were of high value currency in the Niger-Delta region and parts of the regions that later became Nigeria. According to Alagoa, (1980) brass rods were used as medium of exchange for large transactions such as purchasing slaves, ivory, and imported European goods. In cultural context, the Ibibio and Annang used brass rods in trade and settlement of debts. The rods were referred to as *Sitm* or *Afia Okuk* (money or currency) (p. 56).

In the old Oyo Empire, bras-making was popular with artisans creating both functional and artistic items. The Alaafin's palace was adorned with brass pillars; some historical account mentioned the roughly 100 brass pillars in the palace. It is recorded that these decorations were made by Alaafin Aganju, Ajaka's son who reigned in period of prosperity and growth. (Johnson, 2009) There were also artistic and functional objects including cast doors with various designs depicting various social and economic activities in the society, vessels and ornaments. The tradition of Oyo brass casting later spread to other parts of Yorubaland such as Ogbomoso and its environs. In the same vein, the old Benin Kingdom was noted for its thriving brass-casting industry. Ryder, (1980), submits that evidences suggested that large quantities of brass imported to Benin from Europe during the reign of King Esigie enabled the king to foster the art of brass casting using the *cire perdue* technique (p. 116).

However, Bida, a city in Niger State, Central Nigeria is one of the few places where brass casting has survived and remained active till the modern time. This study attempts to explore the trends in the development of brass industry in Bida.

Conceptual Clarifications

Indigenous Knowledge System

Indigenous knowledge (IK) may be defined as the cumulative body of strategies, practices, techniques, tools, intellectual resources, explanations, beliefs, and values accumulated over time in a particular locality, without the interference and imposition of external hegemonic forces. Emeagwali & Dei, (2014) concludes that indigenous knowledge systems are not confined to the material sphere, but often interconnect with spiritual and non-material realms of existence, just as Sefa Dei pointed out, indigenous knowledge is not static (p.15).

It is difficult to give an all-encompassing definition of the concept of indigenous knowledge because of the diversity of culture and geographical variations among different societies. Thus, the concept of indigenous knowledge can be explained in different ways. In the first place it is a direct nature of specific geographical areas under discussion, without which the term in itself is either ambiguous or hollow. Similarly, even within the same geographical areas, certain bodies of knowledge are clearly more indigenous than others, in term of originality of processes and apparatuses being employed to actualise the knowledge system.

Due to the multi-cultural nature of Nigeria, there is vast multiplicity of major and minor variants of productive material cultural practices; otherwise known as indigenous knowledge systems among its people (Emeagweli, 2003). According to Iyanya, (2009), over the years, six

broad categories of indigenous knowledge systems have been identified among Nigerian groups. These categories include Food Production, Pottery Making and Ceramics, Textiles Works, Local Architecture, Indigenous Medicine and then other loosely connected range of productive practices collectively branded as Local Crafts (pp. 286-301). The central feature in all these categories of productive effort is the presence of home-grown knowledge and traditional ingenuity among the practitioners.

Indigenous Technology

Indigenous technology refers to a knowledge of technology that is locally generated, maintained and transferred through a systematic process of participating in the production, observing the challenges inherent therein, experimenting with solution(s), and re-adapting previously identified solutions to the process. Indigenous technology is thus a problem-solving element in the traditional society. Olaoye, (2009) maintains that indigenous technology embodies various aspects of technology developed by or with active participation of the indigenous people through the harnessing and utilization of local materials and natural resources. It makes the heaviest use of abundant indigenous resources, locally produced tools and equipment. Indeed, it is a self-reliant technology that is capital-saving, rather than capital-using, labour using rather than labour saving, and one that could be operated, controlled, repaired and maintained locally (Pp.1-13).

Indigenous technology also refers to all that it takes (in terms of mental and material energy), for man to set in motion, the natural forces of his entire body to make natural materials available in forms useful to his own life. It represents all man's efforts to influence and control natural materials to aid his survival as a social being, and all his attempts to solve essential, but specific problems in his life. For instance, the early man lived in the midst of ferocious carnivorous neighbours; and his quest to survive in this hostile environment prompted him to device objects for protection, which later became the first set of hunting instruments. Indeed, early man's struggle to conquer his environment led to the emergence of the first tool industry, comprising of stones and pebbles, which were later replaced with stronger and more durable iron implements during the metal age.

Indigenous technology refers to the skills, knowledge and expertise developed by the indigenes of a given community for solving their peculiar challenges in productive activities. Indigenous technology also refers to knowledge of technology that is generated, maintained and transmitted through a systematic process of participating in the production, observing the challenges inherent therein, experimenting with solutions and re-adapting previously identified solutions to the process.

Features of indigenous technology include:

i. It embodies various aspects of technology developed with the active participation of the indigenous people.
ii. It harnesses and utilizes locally available materials and natural resources.
iii. It is low-cost, cheap and saves finances.
iv. It is labour-intensive.
v. It emerged from the cultural environment of the people.
vi. It is geared towards solving challenges in indigenous production.

Like in many indigenous technologies and local industries in Nigeria, the features enumerated above are visible in the Bida brass works and qualifies the industry as a formidable traditional technology that has survived the test of modern influence.

Smiting in Pre-colonial Nigeria and its Significance

A peculiar feature that manifested in the government of prominent past empires and kingdoms in the Central Sudan was the metal industry with its elaborate technology. In the old Oyo Empire and the Bini kingdom, guilds, professional association of craftsmen, were in direct contact with the Alaafin and the Oba, respectively. In pre-colonial Yorubaland for instance, blacksmiths played prominent roles in military technology as important ancillary in warfare. They were so important in the Nineteenth century that they formed themselves into guilds. They also enjoyed considerable protection from the leaders of their various localities. They worked on iron, producing iron points for arrows, lance heads (long spears), swords, knives and cutlasses. Blacksmiths worked in close cooperation with the armies replacing exhausted stock of arrows, mending damaged spears and swords, fabricating iron bullets from pieces of waste iron and repairing guns (Adeniran, 1998). The significance of the blacksmith industry to the Nineteenth century military in Nigerian society rests on the fact that most weapons were made of iron, and were locally fabricated and repaired by the smiths. It is reported that around Oyo, a complex of highly specialised mining villages flourished during the pre-colonial period, which indicates the strength of the iron industry in the area (Olutoye and Olapade, 1998, pp. 198-217). Furthermore, blacksmiths had transformative impacts on the society through the provision of tools for the exploitation of the environment as well as stimulating the emergence and development of other industries.

In the same vein, Brass is reported to have made its emergence in Bida during the reign of Etsu Usman Zaki in the 18th century. Hugh Vernon Jackson reported in his book 'Craftwork in Bida' that one of the reasons for Bida's status as a Nigerian Brass making powerhouse was due to the Etsu's recognition for the craft and the royal patronage which followed. The Craft workers or Brass-smiths known in the local Nupe language as the '*Tswatamuku*' were encouraged by the rulers to create and join Guild Organisations known as '*Kunchi*' (Vernon-Jackson, 1960). Indeed, Perani, (1980) believes that this allowed the brass-smiths living in the area of the royal dynasty to capture the lucrative trade and elaborately decorated metal bowls were used as containers for food, drink and kola nuts in every wealthy Nupe household until Bida became the Nigerian Mecca for Brass-smiting and its products.

Geographical and Cultural Context of Bida Brass Works

The city of Bida is geographically located at coordinates 9°05′N 6°01′E with a total Area of 1,698km2(656 sq m) (Olusola, 2012). Bida is the second largest city in Niger State, after the state capital, Minna. Bida is located southwest of the capital.. In fact Bida was the first official capital of Niger state before it was later moved to Minna. The major ethnic group of this city is the Nupe. Indeed, Bida serves as the headquarters of the Nupe kingdom led by the Etsu Nupe (Emir) and consisting of many districts including Agaie, Lapai, Lemu, Pategi, Kutigi, Mokwa, Baddeggi and Katcha among others. Popular places in Bida include Bamisu estate, Ramatu dangana, ECWA poly road, Post Office, Small Market, Main Market and many others (Olusola, 2012, p. 224).

The people of Bida had possessed the skills of making glass works as well as operating standard black smith, brass smith and gold smith in local furnaces and workshops hundreds of years back before colonial groups like the British, French, German, Spanish and the Portuguese arrived in Africa. According to Libabidi et al, (2023) history has it that these pre-colonial technical skills of the Nupe, specifically that of glass making including the making of bottles, which are traditionally called the "*Bikini*" as well as other glass products and ornaments such as bangles, cups, bracelets, beads, and snake-like toys and figurines are produced under melting process, (p. 397–424). Ismail Saliu, (2025) submits that this process involves intense application of heat to the raw materials under a furnace or local fire point in a traditional parlour (*katamba*) dedicated to melting bottles and glasswork. Interestingly, only members of the family that specializes in the glass making can melt and mold bottles in this *Katamba*. No other person outside the family of the glass workers can practice this. It is claimed that these technical skills of the Nupe surprises even the colonial societies who claimed to have come to civilize Africa.

On trading and economy during the colonial era, Bida is known to have participated in international trading with major kingdoms within and outside of Africa as far back as the fifteenth century through trading its products such as glass, brass, gold and silver wares. Empires such as the Songhai, Mali, the Ashante of Ghana as well as the Kanem-Bornu Empire traded with Bida and also facilitated the transfer of her products across the Mediterranean region to the Ottoman empire of Turkey and the Roman Empire of Italy as well as Egypt, Syria and Spain. (Muhammad Yahya, 2025). However, the coming of the British rule crippled the international trading activities of Bida products, which originally depended on the Trans- Saharan trade. British economic policies favoured exploitation of African economic resources rather than developing the African economy and potential industrial capabilities.

Bida brass works hold profound cultural significance within the Nupe community, serving as both artistic expressions and repositories of history. These artifacts are traditionally crafted using the lost-wax casting technique, a method that has its roots in ancient practices. This technique allows artisans to produce highly detailed brass items that embody the community's stories and beliefs. The intricate designs often feature symbols relevant to Nupe cosmology, including representations of spiritual entities and ancestral figures, making each piece a narrative thread in the tapestry of Nupe cultural identity.

Artistic expression in Bida brass works serves to communicate the values, beliefs, and history of the Nupe people. Every artifact whether a ceremonial mask or a decorative item, encapsulates the rich mythological and historical context of the community. According to Nwokocha, (2019), these works are not just mere objects; they act as visual storytelling tools that convey significant cultural messages. For instance, brass masks adorned with symbolic motifs are integral to traditional ceremonies, acting as embodiments of both the spiritual world and community identity (pp. 109-115). Thus, artistry transcends aesthetics, becoming a medium through which cultural narratives are preserved and shared across generations.

Therefore, the cultural context surrounding Bida brass works is marked by a rich interplay of artistry, tradition, and community. As both historical artifacts and contemporary expressions, these works encapsulate the essence of Nupe identity and resilience.

Addressing the challenges they face is imperative not only for the artisans' livelihoods but also for the preservation of a unique aspect of Nigeria's cultural heritage.

Historical Origin of Bida Brass Work

The Bida brass-smiths, *tswatamuku* is well known throughout Nigeria. During the reign of Etsu Usman Zaki and Etsu Masaga, brass and metalwork in the Nupe Kingdom, exclusively from the Bida area, flourished. Under the royal patronage of the ruling clan, the brass-smiths living in the area of the royal dynasty would capture the lucrative trade (Nadel, 1942). The metals, copper and brass were also imported in pre-colonial days via Onitsha and Lagos, transported from the south via the Niger River. Elaborately decorated metal bowls were once used as containers for food, drink and kola nuts in every wealthy Nupe household until they were replaced by Japanese and English enamelware. However, the craftsmen have been struggling to survive in contemporary time. Brass-smiths now use scrap brass and aluminum to produce ladles, bangles, hairpins, bowls, and trays. Small articles are made from scraps of metal, pieces of broken or worn-down ornaments, silver and copper coins, and parts of motor-cars (Judge Attahiru, 2025).

Meanwhile traditional blacksmith techniques are the foundation of producing brass, silver or aluminum products. However, brass-smiting is less labour-intensive than blacksmithing - the tools are specialized and less heavy, the furnace is smaller and takes less effort to maintain, and the workshop forges a spirit of individualism with design. Every participant has a particular task, ranging from firing the charcoal, melting the metal, hammering the object into a shape, to engraving designs on the artifact (Hussainah, 2025). Even though brass-smiths are organized into a guild, it is not a closed profession.

Ismail Saliu- Masaba listed the notable craft groups that work in these metals as follows:

i. *Tswatako* at Tswatako area of Bida noted for brass work;
ii. *Goongbofu* located at Masaga Road Bida for brasswork;
iii. *Tswata Mukun*, Masaba road Bida noted for aluminum works

The craft's significance extends beyond its aesthetic appeal, as it also plays a vital role in the local economy and cultural identity. Promoting and preserving Bida brass work will ensure the continuity of the craft. In addition to its cultural significance, Bida brass work has also played a significant role in the economic development of the region as it is a formidable source of income for many indigenes.

Properties of Brass

The amount of copper and zinc in brass determines its properties. Other metals such as tin, aluminum, lead, and nickel are frequently added to improve the quality of brass. Brass is commonly bright gold, but it can also be reddish-gold or silvery-white. More copper gives the alloy a rose tone, while more zinc gives it a silvery appearance. Brass has a low melting point, between 9000 0C and 9400 0C (Bayley, 2013).

The following are some properties of brass:

Brass is a non-magnetic metal and desirable metal for electrical and electronic equipment due to its non-magnetic nature. It is simple to separate from scrap. Today, almost 90% of all brass alloys are recycled. Because brass is not ferromagnetic, ferrous scrap can be separated

from it by passing the scrap near a powerful magnet. Brass scrap is melted and recast into billets that are extruded into the desired form and size. The general softness of brass means that it can often be machined without the use of cutting fluid, though there are exceptions to this. The surface of the brass metal is resistant to wear. It also has a strong resistance to friction.

High Malleability: it does not break when drawn or stretched into tiny wires. When metal is pulled into wires, it experiences tensile pull. It has higher elasticity than copper and zinc. Copper gives brass its high malleability. Although bronze has copper, too, it isn't as malleable as brass due primarily to the difference in their added content. Zinc apparently has less impact on copper's properties in brass than tin. Brass is more malleable than bronze or zinc. The relatively low melting point of brass (900 to 940 °C; 1,650 to 1,720 °F, depending on composition) and its flow characteristics make it a relatively easy material to cast. By varying the proportions of copper and zinc, the properties of the brass can be changed, allowing hard and soft brasses. The density of brass is 8.4 to 8.73 g/cm3 (0.303 to 0.315 lb/cu in) (Bayley, 2013).

Conductivity: apart from malleability, copper is also the one responsible for brass's heat and electrical conductivity. The only metal that's more conductive than copper is silver, although silver isn't recommended for conduction applications because of its poor thermal resistance. Brass is then utilized in many applications that require conduction in high temperature environments. Brass is a good heat and electricity conductor, and it permits the passage of heat and electricity. Electric cables have brass strands that conduct electricity. Due to brass's unique composition, it holds many properties.

Corrosion Resistance: Brass is a non-ferrous or non-iron-containing metal. None of brass's components are. This means it doesn't corrode via rusting. Some types of brass can even hold up to saltwater, which is ten times more corrosive than fresh water. For this reason, special brasses are used in outer sheathing of ships and dock posts. Brass is anti-corrosive, and the high content of copper forms a protective layer surrounding the metal and protects it against corrosion. Brass will corrode in the presence of moisture, chlorides, acetates, ammonia, and certain acids. This often happens when the copper reacts with sulfur to form a brown and eventually black surface layer of copper sulfide which, if regularly exposed to slightly acidic water such as urban rainwater, can then oxidize in air to form a patina of green-blue copper carbonate. Depending on how the patina layer was formed, it may protect the underlying brass from further damage.

Although copper and zinc have a large difference in electrical potential, the resulting brass alloy does not experience internalized galvanic corrosion because of the absence of a corrosive environment within the mixture. However, if brass is placed in contact with a more noble metal such as silver or gold in such an environment, the brass will corrode galvanically; conversely, if brass is in contact with a less-noble metal such as zinc or iron, the less noble metal will corrode and the brass will be protected.

Antibacterial Property: most non-ferrous metals (metals with less iron content) exhibit ability to cause the infamous oligodynamic effect, a phenomenon in which metal ions target and kill certain proteins in single-celled organisms. Bacteria can be exterminated within minutes when in contact with any of these metals. As it turns out, brass is one of them. It's

this property that makes brass suitable for filtration and purification systems. Brass is a naturally antibacterial metal and does not support pathogens (bacteria or other microbes). As a result, it is suggested for faucets and doorknobs.

Innovations Made by Bida Brass

Brass and Iron smiting are identical with extraction of ores and similarities in tools used and techniques employed. It is however important to note that brass-smiting is less labour-intensive than blacksmithing the tools are specialized and less heavy, the furnace is smaller and takes less effort to maintain, and the workshop forges a spirit of individualism with design. Each man or boy has a particular skill; it may be firing the charcoal, melting the metal, hammering the object into a shape, or design. This simply meant that there was division of labour and specialisation at work. The craft attracts young people into its apprenticeship system to learn and develop in the skills of brass casting by passing through various aspects of the technology. This way, the youths direct their energy to productive ventures and are swayed from vices.

Another important development was the adaptation of Lost-Wax Casting (*Cire Perdue*). The Nupe smiths in Bida mastered and refined the ancient lost-wax method. They developed more detailed and finer wax modeling, allowing sharper, more complex patterns than earlier methods used in Ife or Benin. Their technique included using locally sourced beeswax and fine clay, which improved the precision and finish of the brass artworks (Ismail Saliu-Masaba and Raji Ibrahim, 2025). Moreover, in consistency with the extinct empires of the Central Sudan, Religion was married with craft and it yielded artistic results with the expansion of styles and designs with religious motifs. Nupe brass makers innovated by blending Islamic geometric patterns (stars, arabesques) with traditional Nupe motifs (spirals, zigzags, animals). In addition, Bida smiths were among the first to widely use recycled brass (from colonial coins, imported brassware, old instruments) to create new works. Small articles are made from scraps of metal, pieces of broken or worn-down ornaments, silver and copper coins, and even parts of motor-cars (Raji Ibrahim, 2025). This innovation made brass more economically accessible and sustainable, allowing for mass production for local and regional markets.

Another notable innovation championed by the Bida Brass-smiths was the production of new object types that were in demand locally and regionally. These include ornamental door knockers, elaborate staffs of office for chiefs, and intricately decorated vessels for Islamic ceremonies. These new forms helped expand their market beyond traditional ritual art into every day and ceremonial use.

Organization of Labour and Guild Structure

The Bida brass work represents a rich cultural heritage and technical expertise, primarily practiced by the tswatamuku (brass-smiths) in the Tswata Mukun quarter of Bida. Organized within a guild-like structure, the craft is marked by a flexible and collaborative system that emphasizes a specialized division of labor, where artisans focus on distinct tasks such as operating bellows, melting metal, hammering, or designing intricate patterns, fostering both efficiency and individual creativity. Unlike the rigid hierarchies of other regional guilds, such as the Bida blacksmiths, the brass-smiths' guild is characterized by

open membership, ceremonial leadership, and a community-driven approach, reflecting Nupe values of cultural preservation and adaptability (Abdullahi Massaba, 2025). Historically bolstered by Fulani patronage in the 18th and nineteenth centuries, the guild produced elaborate brass items for royal and domestic use, underscoring its economic and social importance. Today, however, the guild faces challenges from material scarcity and competition with imported goods, threatening its sustainability.

The organization of Nupe craft industries, including brass-smiting, within a patronage system sustained their economic and cultural roles. Under this system, artisans worked collaboratively to fulfill commissions for items such as brass bowls, ladles, and jewelry, which served as status symbols for royal households and wealthy families. This patronage-driven structure implied a coordinated system of production, where workshops in Bida were organized to meet the demands of elite patrons, particularly during the reigns of Etsu Usman Zaki and Etsu Masaga.

Unlike the highly regulated guilds of medieval Europe or the lineage-based blacksmiths' guild in Bida, the brass-smiths' guild operated with a degree of openness, allowing artisans to participate without the strict hereditary restrictions. The guild's flexibility is evident in its membership policies and lack of a rigid hierarchy. While skills are often passed down within families, membership is not strictly limited to specific lineages, enabling young boys, sometimes as young as five or seven, to join as apprentices. This openness contrasts sharply with the Bida blacksmiths' guild, which Vernon-Jackson notes as having stringent entry barriers tied to family lineage.

The brass-smiths' guild fosters a collaborative environment where artisans specialize in tasks such as operating bellows, melting scrap metal, hammering, or designing intricate patterns. This division of labor enhances efficiency and encourages individual creativity, allowing each artisan to develop a unique style within the collective framework. Leadership within the guild is ceremonial and community-oriented, further proving its flexible structure. The guild is overseen by a head artisan, whose role involves coordinating activities, securing raw materials, and representing the guild in dealings with the Etsu Nupe, the Emir of Bida. The appointment of a new guild head is marked by a "turbaning" ceremony, a significant cultural event involving the Etsu Nupe, followed by communal celebrations.

Supported by a council of elder artisans, the guild head manages economic activities, such as distributing large orders, but does not exert the strict control seen in more hierarchical guilds.The guild's organization under patronage systems, highlights its historical adaptability, enabling it to thrive in a dynamic economic context.

Islamic Influence on Brass-Smiths of Bida

The evolution of brass-smiting in Bida cannot be fully understood without recognizing the profound impact of Islam on its development. The introduction of Islam into Nupe land during the nineteenth century under the influence of the Sokoto Caliphate played a pivotal role in shaping the direction, forms, and functions of brass craftsmanship. Islam did not merely coexist with traditional crafts; it redefined them. For example, Islamic teachings discouraged the creation of sculptures representing living beings, especially human and

animal figures, leading Bida artisans to modify their designs towards more abstract, floral, and geometric patterns (Abdulrahman Nahibi Abdullah, 2025). The brass-smiths began to craft objects that aligned with Islamic aesthetics, such as incense burners, Quranic stands, ritual ablution bowls, and mosque ornaments. Thus, the content and symbolism of Bida brass work were deeply Islamicized, reflecting the values of modesty, spirituality, and functional beauty.

Moreover, Islam contributed to the formal organization of brass workers into guild-like structures that mirrored Islamic models of professional associations (known in Arabic as *hirfa*). These groups regulated the quality of production, pricing, and the apprenticeship system, promoting ethics and discipline within the craft. Islamic festivals and royal court activities, such as Eid celebrations and Emirate ceremonies, generated increased demand for specific brass items, thus embedding the industry into the religious and social fabric of Bida society. Items like ceremonial swords, royal vessels, and religious symbols became regular commissions for the brass-smiths, securing their economic and social relevance (Ibrahim Gidado – Masaga, 2025).

In essence, the Islamic influence did not stifle indigenous creativity but rather provided a new ideological framework that allowed Bida brass work to thrive, adapt, and find renewed cultural legitimacy within a changing religious landscape.

Economic and Social Relevance

The brass industry of Bida has historically served as a significant engine of economic activity and social cohesion within Nupe society. Economically, brass work provided a crucial livelihood for many artisans, traders, and their families. The sale of brass items — such as bowls, trays, ceremonial regalia, and religious artifacts — not only satisfied local demand but also attracted merchants from other parts of Nigeria and West Africa, positioning Bida as an important center of craft commerce. The earnings generated through brass work contributed to local wealth accumulation and helped sustain urban development in Bida, especially during the height of the Emirate's power in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Socially, brass work was intricately linked to status, identity, and cultural expression. Ownership of finely crafted brass items often symbolized wealth, nobility, and spiritual devotion. In royal and religious ceremonies, brass artifacts were indispensable, serving as instruments of authority, prestige, and ritual. Furthermore, the organization of brass workers into guild-like associations strengthened communal bonds, fostering collaboration, apprenticeship, and the transmission of skills across generations. These associations often served not only as professional bodies but also as social institutions where disputes were resolved, marriages arranged, and communal projects coordinated.

In a broader sense, Bida's brass industry also played a role in preserving Nupe cultural identity amidst colonial and postcolonial transformations. Despite competition from imported goods and changing tastes, brass work remained a proud symbol of indigenous craftsmanship, embodying the community's resilience, creativity, and adaptability in a rapidly changing world.

In fact it was learnt that brass basins and plates gained popularity around the world as decorative wares for the homes of the bourgeoisie in the sixteenth century. However, after silver and gold replaced brass as decorative metals, brass found other uses in the manufacture of household wares. Indeed, brass later became a major material for the manufacturing of surveying, astronomy and navigation instruments, among others." He said brass works were introduced into Nupe land in the 18th Century during the reign of the then Etsu Nupe, Alhaji Usman Zaki, and were handed down from generation to generation.

Uses of Brass

Brass is a desirable architectural alloy because of its inherent durability and corrosion resistance. Architectural fascia trims and hedges are frequently employed. Certain brass alloys have also been employed to aid in the restoration or refurbishment of historical structures worldwide.

Brass has low friction in settings where metal-on-metal contact is required, which is why it is frequently used in mechanical components. Machines are common in brass gears, locomotive axle boxes, and marine engines. Due to their extraordinary longevity, brass hand tools (hammers, flat knives, etc.) are also highly coveted. Brass is still commonly used in applications where corrosion resistance and low friction are required, such as locks, hinges, gears, bearings, ammunition casings, zippers, plumbing, hose couplings, valves, SCUBA regulators, and electrical plugs and sockets. The composition of brass makes it a favorable substitute for copper in costume jewelry and fashion jewelry, as it exhibits greater resistance to corrosion.

Brass is frequently employed as a component of most general plumbing and electrical systems in homes. Various components of electrical sockets and switches are made of brass alloys. Brass is commonly used in plumbing applications such as valves and pipe fittings such as elbows, plugs, and couplings.

Brass has traditionally been used to make a variety of musical instruments. Brass is utilized to produce trumpets, French horns, trombones, and tubas worldwide. Brass components will be used in the interior of electric instruments such as electric guitars and electric violins. It is used extensively for musical instruments such as horns and bells.

Brass has long been a popular material for its bright gold-like appearance and is still used for drawer pulls and doorknobs. It has also been widely used to make sculpture and utensils because of its low melting point, high workability (both with hand tools and with modern turning and milling machines), durability, and electrical and thermal conductivity. Brasses with higher copper content are softer and more golden in colour; conversely those with less copper and thus more zinc are harder and more silvery in colour. Brass is often used preferred because of its ability to resist spark and flame, especially in fittings and tools close to flammable and explosive materials.

Challenges and Transformation in Modern Times

Rural artisans in Bida town of Nigeria earn more than 50% of their livelihood from local handicraft making. In Bida town, several craftsmen, whose livelihood depends on making local products like spoons, metals, glass, potters, metal wares, silver, copper, and other pieces of jewelry are deprived of local fame. Their poor economic background and virtually no exposure to the outside world has left them vulnerable. The artisans have expertise only in their craft, and limited scope for an alternative livelihood.

Challenges of Bida Brass Industry

i. Economic Constraints: Limited capital is a major obstacle for artisans in Bida. Many craftsmen are unemployed or underemployed, relying on traditional crafts as their primary source of income. This economic instability hampers their ability to invest in better tools or material
ii. Cultural Shifts: There is a growing trend among younger generations to migrate to urban areas in search of white-collar jobs, leading to a decline in interest in traditional crafts like brass work. This migration results in a loss of skilled artisans and knowledge transfer.
iii. Competition from Imported Goods: The influx of cheaper imported products has made it difficult for local craftsmen to compete. Many consumers prefer these affordable alternatives over locally made brass items, which can be more expensive due to the labor-intensive production process
iv. Lack of Support and Recognition: Traditional crafts often lack institutional support and recognition, which can lead to neglect and eventual extinction if not documented and promoted effectively.

Development Prospects of Bida Brass Industry

In spite of the challenges faced by the Bida brass industry, efforts are still on to revitalise Bidan the crafts. Notable among these efforts are:

i. Cultural Preservation Initiatives**:** Various organizations and individuals are working towards documenting and promoting traditional crafts through exhibitions and educational programs. For instance, documentaries like "The Lost Legacy of Bida Bikini" highlight the craftsmanship involved in Bida's glassmaking and brasswork

ii. Community Engagement: Local artisans are encouraged to collaborate and share skills through workshops and apprenticeships, fostering a sense of community that can help sustain the craft

iii. Tourism Potential: There is an increasing recognition of the potential for heritage crafts to attract tourism, which could provide economic benefits for local communities while preserving cultural practices

Conclusion

Brass works has a long history among the Nupe people in Bida. The industry and its technology dates back to the precolonial period and the craft supported the local economy and contributed to the Trans Saharan Trade trade relation between the Central Sudan and the Arabs. Records indicate significant movement of Bida crafts including ornaments, decorative items including brass pots, cups, bangles, staffs, ornamental swords, spears, and

other artifacts. The industry recorded significant youth participation with elaborate division of labour. However, in spite of challenges such as economic constraints, cultural shifts, competition from imports, and lack of support, the Bida brass has remained active, even though on a limited scale. Efforts such as community engagement, cultural initiatives and enlighten, tourism campaigns and calls for government assistance are being made to promote its preservation and development.

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Appendices

1. Ornamental Brass Pots

Source: picture taken by researcher During field work at Bida, 20th March 2026



2. Brass-casting Process

Source: picture taken by researcher During field work at Bida, 20th March 2026



3. Brass Staff

Source: Picture taken by the researcher during fieldwork at Bida, 20th March 2026

