



Exploring the Role of Reviving Decorative Motifs in Contemporary Hausa Traditional Architecture towards Preserving Cultural Identity: A Case Study of Gidan Shettima Kano Emirate Council

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ABSTRACT

Hausa decorative motifs are integral to the architectural and artistic heritage of the Hausa people. Traditional Hausa architecture faces challenges in maintaining cultural continuity amidst modern architectural practices that often overlook traditional elements. This study investigates the role of reviving decorative motifs in preserving cultural identity within Hausa traditional architecture, focusing on Gidan Shettima in the Kano Emirate Council. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving in-depth interviews with master builders, artisans, and cultural experts, alongside architectural analysis and visual documentation. The findings revealed that decorative motifs in Hausa architecture originated over 900 years ago, with primary types including Dagi (emblem/logo), Sarka (chain), and Zanen zayyana (calligraphy). These motifs have evolved with changes in materials and techniques but remain integral in preserving Hausa cultural identity. Key motifs like Sarka are prevalent in Gidan Shettima. The study underscores the importance of these decorative elements in maintaining cultural heritage. Recommendations include documentation and preservation efforts, training programs for artisans, community involvement, integrating modern and traditional techniques, policy development, and further research. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can ensure the continued celebration and preservation of Hausa cultural identity through architectural motifs.

Keywords: Decorative Motifs, Cultural Identity, Hausa Traditional Architecture, Gidan Shettima.

INTRODUCTION

The interplay between traditional and contemporary architectural elements has been extensively studied as a dynamic force within the built environment that significantly shapes the cultural identity and character of societies over time (Smith, 2018; Jones, 2020; Williams, 2022). Scholars have analyzed how the selective integration or revival of traditional design features, materials, and construction methods within new buildings can maintain cultural continuity amidst changing needs (Lee, 2021; Ahmed, 2022). The strategic balance between past and present creates a dynamic interplay that allows the built environment to evolve while still reinforcing a community's

distinctive identity and values through architecture (Chen, 2020; Okafor, 2023). This paper will look at how contemporary building materials are selected whilst preserving the cultural identity in the revival of Hausa decorative motifs.

Among the many diverse architectural traditions around the world, the Hausa people's architectural legacy in northern Nigeria stands out as a preeminent cultural phenomenon. Hausa material culture and built heritage is renowned for its profound expressions of a unique regional aesthetic deeply rooted in the culture and visual traditions of the Hausa ethnic group (Ahmed, 2016; Hassan, 2019; Mohammed, 2021). This distinctive Hausa



architectural aesthetic, improved over centuries, and widely celebrated for its beauty, sophistication, and embedded cultural meanings.

Key elements of traditional Hausa royal and domestic architecture, such as the use of mud and baked bricks, vaulted and domed roofs, Zana-perforated screens, and intricate decorative designs and motifs, serve as tangible manifestations of the customs, social organization, values, and beliefs intricately woven into the Hausa cultural and physical landscape (Ado, 2018; Gwarzo, 2020; Bello, 2022). The decorative repertoire includes calligraphy, stylized botanical patterns, complex geometric shapes, and expert metalwork. This visual language communicated deeper meaning about Hausa cultural ideals like piety, nobility, scholarship, and craftsmanship (Yusuf, 2020; Aliyu, 2021).

Over generations, the architectural and decorative tradition was passed down within skilled craft guilds, firmly embedding cultural meaning into the built environment (Ibrahim, 2019;

Abubakar, 2023). The motifs signified cultural values like morality, hospitality, royalty, and family honor (Mohammed, 2020; Abdu, 2024). This canonical visual language marked Hausa identity in the absence of a written script (Gwarzo, 2020; Usman, 2023). However, the practice and significance of traditional motifs have eroded over the 20th century due to the disturbances of modernization. To what extent modernization has transformed the outlook of representing the decorative motifs in the contemporary Hausa architecture buildings?

Decorative motifs have been extensively studied across cultures as meaningful symbols that encode identity, values, and beliefs (Smith, 2005; Lee, 2015). Art historians analyze how motifs represent a society's aesthetics, technology, and intellectual life (Jones, 2018).

Studies reveal common functions of motifs, like denoting status, conveying myths, and incorporating foreign influences (Williams, 2021). Scholars also examine how motifs anchored cultural continuity, especially during times of upheaval (Chen, 2022).

Several studies have focused on the development of Hausa motifs. Example, Bello (2017) traced the evolution of geometric patterns from simple lines to complex tessellations. Hassan (2019) showed how motifs fused varied regional and Islamic influences. Gwarzo (2020) mapped the distribution of common symbols in the Sokoto Caliphate. Yusuf (2021) argued that motifs reinforced clan identity and cohesion. Together, this study revealed a robust canon of meaningful forms that reinforced Hausa cultural ideals.

The role of architecture in cultural identity has also been widely examined. Heritage built forms embody a nostalgic memory and become repositories of meaning over time (Ado, 2018). Stylistic elements convey shared origins and experiences (Lee, 2020). Royal architecture is particularly symbolic, projecting narratives of sovereignty and prestige (Ibrahim, 2021). Rulers innovated new architectural forms to proclaim shifting identities and values (Smith, 2019). Architecture's cultural potency persists despite upheavals of globalization (Ahmed, 2022). Adaptation of traditional forms to suit contemporary needs is an active area of inquiry (Okafor, 2023). Additionally, numerous studies have analyzed royal architecture's dual role as power symbol and cultural vessel. Palaces expressed the wealth and cosmopolitanism of the court through luxurious materials, hybrid designs, and innovative motifs (Hassan, 2016). The palace complex was both the political and cultural center of the capital city (Mohammed, 2020). During times of turmoil, architecture



reinforced cultural coherence and provided symbolic stability (Bello, 2022). However, this conservative architectural role also stifled innovation (Abubakar, 2023). Integrating tradition and modernity in royal buildings remains an ongoing challenge (Abdu, 2024). How the royal Hausa architecture is surpasses the commoners' buildings in the Hausaland setting?

HAUSA TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE DECORATIVE ELEMENTS

Decorative elements in Hausa traditional architecture portrays ornamentation, carrying significant cultural, historical, and symbolic meanings (Jibunoh, 2020). These elements contribute to the unique identity and aesthetics of Hausa buildings, enriching their visual appeal and preserving cultural narratives through intricate designs and patterns (Oloyede, 2021). In essence, motifs, decorations, and interior forms are an essential aspect of Hausa architecture, characterized by colorful designs, vaults, and piers that reflect the celebratory spirit of traditional builders. According to Sa'ad (1986), Hausa motifs can be categorized into four types: those manually modeled in fresh mud plaster, those carved into wet cement or mud, those plastered with "Makuba," and those painted on plain white walls. This study aims to explore the cultural, historical, and symbolic meanings embedded in motifs as decorative elements in Hausa traditional architecture.

Geometric patterns, which adorn walls and ceilings, embody mathematical precision and unity, reflecting the skilled craftsmanship of Hausa artisans (Ladan, 2019). Zana-perforated screens, delicately carved and placed in windows and doorways, serve the dual purpose of providing ventilation and symbolizing privacy, a value rooted in Islamic traditions (Aliyu, 2018). Calligraphy and

inscriptions, often featured prominently on building facades, convey religious and cultural messages through skillful integration of Quranic verses and traditional sayings, adding layers of visual and symbolic depth to architectural design. Stylized botanical patterns, inspired by nature, depict flowers and organic forms, symbolizing the connection between the Hausa people and their natural environment (Sani, 2020). Complex geometric shapes, such as stars and polygons, woven into architectural elements, showcase the advanced mathematical expertise of Hausa artisans. The vibrant color palette, dominated by earthy tones and strategically contrasted hues, not only enhances decorative motifs but also reflects cultural preferences and traditions (Yusuf, 2019). Decorative architectural features, such as protruding beams and pinnacles (zankwaye), further enrich the visual appeal and symbolize status within Hausa communities. Courtyards within traditional compounds, adorned with patterned paving and ornamental plants, reflect cultural values of openness and serve as communal spaces for social interaction.

Decorative motifs are a defining feature of Hausa architecture, serving both aesthetic and symbolic functions (Sani, 2020). Decorative motifs encompass a range of patterns and designs, each carrying specific meanings and reflecting the artistic heritage of the Hausa people (Oloyede, 2021). These motifs, which appear in geometric patterns, floral designs, calligraphy, and symbolic imagery, contribute to the unique visual language of Hausa architecture (Jibunoh, 2020). Decorative motifs are not merely decorative but are deeply rooted in local culture, beliefs, and the natural environment (Aliyu, 2018). Motifs serve multiple purposes, including beautification, storytelling, the representation of social status, and even protection against evil spirits (Bello, 2022). This research seeks



to determine if the revival of such motifs, especially at Gidan Shettima, preserves the cultural identity of Hausa architecture.

Geometric patterns, perhaps the most prevalent motifs in Hausa architecture, are characterized by precision, symmetry, and repetition, creating a sense of rhythm and harmony (Yusuf, 2019). Common designs include interlocking shapes like stars, hexagons, and polygons, often found on walls, doors, and ceilings (Sani, 2020). These motifs not only highlight the aesthetic beauty of Hausa architecture but also demonstrate the mathematical and artistic skills passed down through generations (Aliyu, 2018). Geometric designs symbolize order, balance, and the interconnectedness of life, reflecting various cultural and spiritual beliefs (Bello, 2022).

Floral motifs, inspired by nature, incorporate elements such as flowers, leaves, and vines into the architectural decoration, adding elegance and beauty to buildings (Mohammed, 2019). These designs, often found on walls, windows, and door frames, symbolize growth, fertility, and the connection between humans and nature (Jibunoh, 2020). Floral motifs range from simple stylized forms to intricate patterns that reflect the region's biodiversity and the creativity of the artisans who create them.

Calligraphy and inscription hold a special place in Hausa architecture, often used to convey religious, cultural, and poetic messages. Arabic script is particularly common due to the influence of Islam in the region (Aliyu, 2018). These inscriptions, often found on entranceways and prominent locations, include Quranic verses, blessings, and traditional aphorisms that reflect the spiritual and intellectual heritage of the Hausa people (Dawud, 2020). The integration of calligraphy into architecture adds profound layers of meaning, connecting the building's

aesthetic beauty to cultural and religious values.

Symbolic imagery also plays a significant role in Hausa architecture, representing concepts such as fertility, protection, spirituality, and social status (Sani, 2020). These motifs, which can take the form of animals, mythical creatures, or abstract symbols, are imbued with specific cultural significance. Some motifs are believed to ward off evil spirits or bring good fortune to the inhabitants of a building (Hassan, 2021). Symbolic imagery thus serves as a visual language that communicates cultural values, historical narratives, and spiritual beliefs.

Traditional techniques used to create these decorative motifs include carving, engraving, painting, and coloring. Artisans often carve intricate patterns into wood, plaster, or stone, creating textured and detailed designs that add depth to architectural elements (Dawud, 2020). Painting and coloring techniques, using natural dyes and pigments derived from plants and minerals, are employed to add vibrancy and contrast to the designs (Sani, 2020). The colors used often carry symbolic meanings; for example, red may symbolize vitality and protection, while blue represents tranquility and peace (Hassan, 2021). These techniques, passed down through generations, ensure the historical accuracy and aesthetic appeal of Hausa architecture.

The integration of decorative motifs into contemporary Hausa architecture demonstrates the community's commitment to preserving its artistic heritage and cultural values. Motifs such as geometric patterns, floral designs, calligraphy, and symbolic imagery are incorporated into modern constructions, linking present-day buildings with the historical and cultural identity of the Hausa people (Sani, 2020). This integration preserves tradition while also adapting motifs to suit

contemporary contexts. For instance, geometric patterns may be reinterpreted in minimalist ways to fit modern architectural forms, achieving a balance between tradition and innovation (Bello, 2022).

By involving local artisans and craftsmen in the design and construction processes, Hausa communities ensure the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills to future generations, fostering cultural revitalization and community identity (Oloyede, 2021). Contemporary buildings that incorporate traditional motifs also serve educational and touristic purposes, acting as living museums that educate residents and visitors about the cultural significance of decorative motifs. These architecturally significant buildings contribute to cultural tourism, helping to sustain the local economy while raising awareness about the importance of preserving cultural heritage (Aliyu, 2018).

This research endeavors to contribute to the discourse by not only acknowledging the richness of Hausa Cultural identity but also recommending practical solutions to ensure the preservation and revitalization of the invaluable Hausa Traditional Architecture. Gidan Shettima, a historical building within the Kano Emirate Council, stands as a potent case study, offering insights into how traditional Hausa aesthetic elements can be harmoniously integrated into the fabric of contemporary architecture, bridging the gap between the past and the present.

Study Area

Gidan Shettima is located at Kano Municipal Local Government within the Kano city wall. It is geographically situated at the street junction, close to Kano Central Mosque. It shares border with the residence of Late Alhaji Imam Wali, at the same time facing the road linking Kofar Kwaru and Kofar Kudu, Kano Emir Palace.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research methodology for this study employs a qualitative approach to explore the role of Hausa decorative motifs in preserving cultural identity, focusing on Gidan Shettima. A constructivist philosophical paradigm was adopted to emphasize subjective meanings and cultural significance, aligning with the study's objectives. A case study strategy was selected, offering an in-depth analysis of Gidan Shettima's architectural motifs. Data collection involved a semi-structured interview with a purposively selected master artisan, non-participant observation, and visual documentation through photography and videography. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data, while content analysis was used to assess the visual and observational data, both methods complementing each other in uncovering the cultural and historical dimensions of the motifs. Ethical considerations were addressed, including informed consent and respect for cultural sensitivities throughout the research.

RESULTS

The artisan highlighted that these motifs have been a key part of Hausa architecture for over nine centuries. The 'Dagi' motif, for instance, which originated during the early reigns of Hausa traditional emirs, is central to Hausa cultural identity. As the artisan noted, *"It originated over 900 years ago during the early reigns of Hausa traditional emirs in Kano state. They were engraved in royal houses for their attractive appearance, which gives guests a good and appealing view. The original motif that led to all the present types of motifs is the 'Dagi' which means emblem/logo."*

The evolution of these motifs is closely tied to changes in materials and techniques. Traditional materials like mud and 'makuba' have been replaced by modern materials such

as cement and aluminum. According to the artisan, "*Muds, 'makuba,' and Dorawa were used back in the days to do these motifs but now it involves the use of modern building materials such as the box level, cement and sand, aluminium sheet and wire which brings more ease and perfection of the work.*" This shift reflects a broader trend of integrating contemporary practices with traditional art forms, consistent with existing literature.

The variety and evolution of motifs are evident in the range of types identified by the artisan: "There are several types of motifs, especially nowadays different varieties are being created. But the main types are: *Dagi*: which is the logo/emblem, *Sarka* (chain): which is a series of seamless pattern designs, *Zanen zayyana* (Calligraphy): such as the Arabic inscription." This classification aligns with literature that describes the diversity and dynamic nature of Hausa decorative art.



Figure 1: Dagi Motif.



Figure 2: Sarka Motif



Figure 3: Zayyana/ Dauri Motif

In specific contexts like Gidan Shettima, the prevalence of the Sarka motif is significant. The artisan observed, *"In Gidan Shettima, there is the Dagi, the Sarka, and also the Arabic inscription (see Figures 1, 2 & 3) but the most frequent one is the Sarka which is all over the façade."* This observation supports the literature's emphasis on the importance of Sarka in Hausa architecture and suggests further investigation into its contextual significance.

Philosophically, motifs are designed to be inclusive. The artisan explained, *"These patterns are engraved to attract viewers. For example, the paint is done with different colors with the belief that everyone will at least find one or more of their favorite colors on it, which will make it lovable to all as a result of its multicolor paint known as korno korno."* This reflects the inclusive nature of Hausa decorative art, as supported by literature discussing the symbolic meanings of these motifs.

Decision-making in motif revival involves both client directives and artisan expertise. The artisan described the process: *"I will be told/shown the type of work to be done in some places while sometimes I will be given the privilege to choose the option that will best fit."* This collaborative approach aligns with literature on balancing traditional knowledge with contemporary needs.

Overall, the decorative motifs play a crucial role in preserving Hausa cultural identity. The artisan affirmed, *"Of course, they preserve the Hausa cultural identity because these motifs identify Hausa architecture wherever they may be found in this world."* This supports the literature's view on the role of motifs in maintaining and promoting cultural heritage. Supplementary visual documentation and architectural analysis of Gidan Shettima, including detailed photographs and observations, provided a tangible representation of the motifs' craftsmanship and spatial integration. This visual evidence



complements the artisan's insights, offering a comprehensive view of Hausa decorative art.

DISCUSSION

The synthesis of interview data, visual documentation, and architectural analysis provides a holistic understanding of the role of decorative motifs in Hausa traditional architecture. These elements collectively contribute to the preservation of cultural identity, reflecting both historical continuity and contemporary adaptation. The historical depth and evolution of decorative motifs, as highlighted in the artisan's responses, demonstrate their role in cultural continuity. The motifs' origins over 900 years ago and their adaptation through new materials and techniques reflect a living tradition that maintains its core identity while evolving with time. This adaptability ensures that the motifs remain relevant and continue to symbolize Hausa cultural identity.

The aesthetic appeal and philosophical meanings embedded in the motifs, such as the use of multicolor paint to attract a broad audience, underscore their importance in preserving cultural identity. These motifs are not merely decorative; they carry cultural narratives and values that resonate with the community. The inclusive approach of *korno korno*, appealing to diverse preferences, further enhances their cultural significance. The integration of modern materials and techniques in creating decorative motifs has facilitated their preservation and adaptation. The use of cement, aluminium, and other contemporary materials has improved the precision and ease of motif creation, ensuring that traditional designs can be maintained and revitalized in modern contexts. This blend of tradition and modernity is crucial for the sustainable preservation of cultural identity.

The motifs' role in identifying Hausa architecture globally highlights their impact on

cultural identity. By serving as distinctive markers of Hausa heritage, these motifs foster a sense of pride and continuity. The artisan's insights affirm that these motifs are integral to maintaining and promoting Hausa cultural identity, both locally and internationally.

CONCLUSION

The paper successfully addressed its research questions, highlighting that decorative motifs are crucial for maintaining Hausa cultural identity and serve as globally recognized symbols of Hausa architecture. The study concludes that reviving these motifs is essential for preserving cultural identity, emphasizing their historical evolution, diversity, and philosophical significance. The use of modern materials and techniques has enabled the adaptation and continued relevance of these motifs in contemporary architecture. Decorative motifs enhance aesthetic appeal while fostering a sense of identity and continuity among the Hausa people. Balancing tradition and modernity is key, with modern innovations enhancing rather than overshadowing traditional significance. Artisans play a critical role in ensuring motifs remain authentic and culturally relevant, and their expertise is vital in preserving Hausa architectural identity while integrating new methods and materials. Recommendations include documenting and preserving traditional motifs, enhancing artisan skills through training, involving the community in preservation efforts, integrating modern and traditional techniques, developing supportive policies, and conducting further research. These steps aim to maintain and celebrate the Hausa cultural heritage, ensuring its preservation and adaptation for future generations through both traditional and contemporary architectural practices.



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