

Traditional Hausa-Fulani Architecture and its Interior Decorations

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Abstract

Engaging a lineal historical narrative, this article unravels the reality of an indigenous artform, the Wall Decorations of the Hausa-Fulani people of northern Nigeria. Grounding the discourse on archival materials culled from secondary sources and photography to feed a history; all dependent on the reality of a heterogenous aesthetic and technical know-how, this essay weaves a story of the artistry and building engineering of entirely local Hausa folks' art and craft tradition. In a hermeneutic analogy, however, the ingenuity of local mud-house builders' and decorators, the Gwani, tells the story of Hausa aesthetics and "real engineering" feat.

Keywords: *Traditional Architecture, Interior Decorations*

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Background to the Study

The decorative features of Hausa-Fulani architecture highlight the aesthetics and structural virtuosity of Hausa architectural technology. Having mastered the structural and constructional aspects of their traditional architecture, the finest Hausa master builders concentrated on designing spaces for aesthetic effect. Their architectural designs are geared towards the conceptual integration of structural and aesthetic considerations with emphasis on surface designs. These became fashionable amongst the wealthy, the *nouveau-riches*, fashionable wealthy, women of easy virtue: the *Magajiyas* and the elite, especially in Birnin Zaria and Birnin Kano in the twentieth century. For an organic appraisal of Hausa architecture, it is imperative that an analysis of the interface between structure and design be incorporated in this study. While this study makes little pretense to the scholastic vigor required by the social sciences; it does reveal to considerable degree both the nature of these components in the architectural *repertoire* that have socio-cultural and economic change.

The urban architecture of Hausa-land differs in many respects from other vernacular architectural styles of West Africa. Hausa-land is located in the savanna and on the fringes of the Sahel in Northern Nigeria. Since the Middle Ages, scholars agree, the Hausas have been organized into Islamized city states. Within the massive sun-dried brick walls of each capital city all the winding roads and footpaths from the outer periphery and surrounding countryside converge onto both the central market and the mud palace and its adjacent congregational mosque. The mud palace, dwelling places and mosque were all designed by master builders who belonged to distinct guilds.

The achievements of these master builders should be seen against the background of the rural architecture. The locals continue to build their traditional cone and cylinder thatched rooms alongside the more prestigious mud roofed rooms, constructed by itinerant master builders. Magnificent Hausa architecture is sited in the mosques, city gates/towers and in dwelling houses. Master builders, popularly known as *Gwani*, in the Hausa language; have combined their talents, building skills and traditional technologies to create mosques. The Zaria Mosque, now in ruins, built in circa 1836 is acclaimed, by respected architectural scholars to be the finest of Hausa architecture. According to David Aradeon (1984); the master employed piers' supports, horizontally fluted arches to create a subdued atmosphere appropriate for prayerful communion. Structures towering above seventy feet have been known in Hausa architectural landscapes; since the nineteenth century. At the present the approximately 9.00 mm (3011) high space in *Kot at Kwaru*, the late medieval gate house for the Kano palace is one of the highest known city spaces (Aradeon 1981). However, two storied buildings are a common place in urban Birnin Kano, Zaria and Bauchi.

These master masons designed and built lofty spaces in mud. The most common in the architecture is the entry-reception chamber, the *Zaura*. Here the master of the household receives and entertains guests and engages in business or craft work, away from the privacy of his household. The reception halls (*Zaure a bakin Gidan*) of palaces, the aristocracy and the wealthy were the most elaborately embellished. The palatial council chamber is the loftiest space in each emirate.

Hausa Architectural Technology

The technical achievements of the Hausa masters were noteworthy. The master mud builders perfected a reinforced mud arch, which can elegantly span twenty-four feet (Fig. 50). They evolved three basic arch configurations for supporting lofty roofs; arches intersecting at the crown like the ribs of an umbrella; arches intersecting to form coffers; and arches abutted by half arches. To ensure the proper transition from the walls of a square room to the circular base of a dome, they developed corner panels and diagonal arches. The largest documented tree span, 2 x 28 feet is over one hundred years old and still in good condition (Aradeon 1984, Tukur 1984). The lofty roofs for flat slabs and for lengthy domes rest on a permanent framework of *azara*, the durable palm stem used for construction. These are lengths of palm trunk wood, usually 2x3" in cross-section. As the infilling members of a permanent form work for the ceiling, they support a layer of mats, a layer of mud and a final layer of an impervious compound of grass, earth and indigo dye pits residue. The reinforced mud arch is the most distinctive feature of Hausa architectural form configuration. To form one end of the arch, a set of two or more *Azara* is embedded vertically into the wall. Successive sets are laid out progressively diminishing inches to create the permanent framework for the basic curve of the final arch form. Two legs of the arch are cantilevered into the space simultaneously from opposing walls and joined by abutting each other. However, in the case of long spans, by lying a set of long *Azara* atop their extremes. A specially prepared mud 'plaster' is used to till out the soffit of this permanent framework in order to achieve a smooth curving arch form.

From this account there are two important parts of the structure: the dome and the arches. Each of them has its peculiar decorative forms from the interior. These decorative forms will now be discussed starting with the dome. The interior designs of these houses are as interesting as the outside decorations. The emphasis here is mainly on the interior domes. The master builders often reveal the permanent form work of their soffits in order to exploit the decorative potentialities inherent in the form work. To enhance the smaller revealed infilling members, they are laid on the diagonal. This creates a lively herring-bone pattern, alternating with the rigid *Azara*. Several bays are often linked in a revolving pattern around a central pier or around the apex intersecting traverse arches.

In the finest examples of revealed soffit designs, this play of contrasting colors, textures and forms is transformed into an integrated abstract in design. Examples abound in major Hausa emirates even today: For example, the partially revealed form work: in the dome of the *Yangoro* mosque (designed by Bala. *Gwani*, Kano), is part of a dramatic overall pattern.' emanating from the crown of the dome like rays of the sun (FIGS. 51, 52).

The dome soffit is handled in bold relief with variations in depth corresponding to structural importance. The white arches stand out against the triangular arch compartment. At the crown the infilling members have been plastered and painted white, thereby coalescing into one the functions of all the arches. *Azara* joints span vertically, creating the sunburst pattern. These *Azaras* have received only one light coat of paint so that the variegated white on their grainy surface contrasts with the smooth plasterwork surrounding it. The yellow ochre of the mats glow through the interstices. This revealed ceiling work, with its subtly articulated structure enhances and reinforces the lofty elegance of relatively smooth dome.

Brilliantly Painted Embossed Designs

The Hausa builders have developed an elaborate 'language' of embossed patterns, as they have a small but glittering palette of indigenous paints. Almost all the local paints are employed to effect the brilliantly colored soffit of any one *Soro*: the reception hall. To create the embossed designs (usually relief formations) red laterite earth is mixed with liquid extract from plants to form a slippery paste that can easily be molded into two dimensional motifs. According to Saad (1981:239) before this is applied, the soffit is well plastered to accentuate the level of changes created in the process of building up the formation for the dome skin.

Kaura, a local gum is usually used as a bonding base for the various natural ingredients used; in the make-up of indigenous paints. White and red are the most common colors. Higher quality brilliant white is produced with additive of burnt and pulverized animal bones. Higher quality brilliant red is obtained from an addition of riverbed ferric acid. Blue is produced from indigo dye pit residual wastes. Jet black is obtained by charring jet black *soghum* seeds. Green is a product of select native herbs and lead portions. *Mica* is, however, employed as the cause of glittering sheen on adobe wall paintings (Saad 1981: 249-231). The colorful soffits of distinctive *Soros* across Hausaland illustrate how the master builders have transformed Islamic principles of architectural design. Contrary to standard Islamic principles, the Hausa handle the decorative aspects of their architectural designs so that they underscore rather than obscure structure (Aradeon 1984). In keeping with Islamic tenets, a sumptuous overall surface decoration covers walls, the ceiling and the structural arches. Moreover, Islamic design techniques characterized by repetition, symmetry and variation of scale are exploited to unify and vary the decorative composition.

An architype surface layout would look like this: The central motif of a tiny circle within a concave lozenge, which itself is duplicated several times. This picked up in slightly larger scale between the arches as they spring from each of the form walls, and in a minute scale throughout the ceiling. Similarly, the architype hemispherical tan motif is evident in each of the form corners and versions of its sweeping curve abound throughout the ceiling. This helps to unify the decorative composition. The other unifying element in the soffit design is the repetition of the outline of each motif several times like ripples in a pond. In classic Islamic architectural design, the surface is usually divided into grids, each possessing its own design, there is the fear of empty spaces (Michelle 1978: 144ff, 16ff) However, the distinctive Hausa aspect of this type of *horror vacui* design is the division of the surfaces into grids which correspond to the structural divisions in the permanent form work (FIG.)

Triangular panels of contiguous *Azara* called *tauyi* spans are usually used to build up the permanent formwork of the domes mud skin. *Tauyi* spans the corners of the dome. Wall *tauyi*, panels of *Azara* laid parallel to the wall, span from one corner *tauyi* to the next, creating small slightly raised panels flanking all the arches. Finally, the remaining rectilinear spaces are tiled in. Each of these panels are decorated with its own embossed motif as are each arch. Thusly, a trained eye would simultaneously perceive the structural Level changes derived from the super-imposed *tauyi* panels. This enhances the beauty of the heavily embossed soffit.

The Embellishment of Arches

Hausa arches are designed to meet the aesthetic ends of form and functional articulation. Even where soffits of arches in Hausa mansions are smooth, the plastering is a non-essential element of durability. The master builder refers the process of applying the form-giving plaster to the permanent form work as *tidda-barban* meaning sharpening of the features of the leg (Saad 1981:211}. The design of the basic curve of the arch simply gives room for self-expression by the builder. It may be pointed out that hemispherical as the old Zaria Mosque is, it is parabolic/flattered out like a basket handle.

Horizontal moldings on the soffits of arches provide an additional aesthetic local point. In the lateral bay of the old Zaria Mosque, this motif is exaggerated and applied to the entire surface area, giving the soffit a washer-board horizontal fluting. Contemporary embossed work on arches is more extravagant and covers the entire soffit to correspond with the horror vacui embossing of the walls and soffit. The embossed designs are arranged as a series of imposed motifs placed one above the other and occasionally separated by a horizontal cornice. The design of the motifs, their size and arrangement differ from the designs on the ceilings and walls just enough to set the arches off as distinct architectural elements (FIGS. 3-5). Virtuoso experimentation with arch construction has led to the design of double-decker arches. Transverse arches supporting dome structures are two-tiered. A lattice work of mud-encased *Azara* dramatically unites the super imposed arches. Grandeur, structural load bearing articulation and share aesthetic consideration are design imperatives of the Hausa builder. Arch configurations have been handled in a *trompe l'oeil* manner exploiting the expectancy that the relative structural importance of the arches will be articulated by differences in lengths and breaths.

Recognizing the architectural virtuosity of their ceiling structures, Hausa builders exploit the structural and decorative possibilities of their limited materials to create a variety of aesthetically pleasing effects in the soffits. The permanent formwork in the soffits of most ceilings is revealed or partially revealed to simultaneously embellish the soffit and reveal the structure. The arches in Hausa architecture perform structural, form giving and decorative roles. Often the articulation of the arches expresses their structural significance and simultaneously embellishes the space. Even where these configurations falsify the structure to create a more impressive and elegant space, the desired effect is dependent on a knowledge of Hausa structure. Moreover, the actual structural system remains visible to the discerning eye. The Zaria mosque, engaged as the main building interior for the purposes of the entire discourse of this Article, remains the quintessential epitome of Hausa-Fulani modern aesthetics in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Since these embellishments and decorative paraphernalia served no structural purposes, it is relevant to explore their possible place in the entire Hausa-Fulani Islamic architectural framework. I, therefore, propose to employ a hypothesis by one of the fore-most scholars in the field of Islamic architecture, Labelle Prussin, (1976) claimed:

It we assume that architecture fulfils a linguistic role, then communication is affected to considerable degree through the visual sense. The surface of an architectural form constitutes a graphic system revealing space as well as form to both viewer and user. Furthermore, surfaces are called upon to play a far greater role in communication in non/semi-literate societies, where communication can be affected through a wide range of aural and visual media.

These wall surfaces of the Zaria mosque Soro, the palace reception chambers of both Emir and aristocratic palaces; and the various *Soros* in the mud-buildings of simple, ordinary folks (with their calligraphic inscriptions and abstractions of script; in that sense constitute a psychographic system. Their function transcends mere communication unlike modern day Bill-boards. They delved deep into the hierarchies of entrenched esoteric iconography of the peoples; almost without exception, therefore, these abstractions were concentrated on entrance portals, at doorways and window openings, and at breaks in surface planes such as corners and parapets. These to my mind, constitute protective envelopes, warding off danger and the unknown from these planes of transition and meditation. There is a dire need to study the deeper meanings of the Islamic iconography in architectural decorations and embellishments in Hausaland, before the master craftsmen/masons (*Gwani*) disappear.

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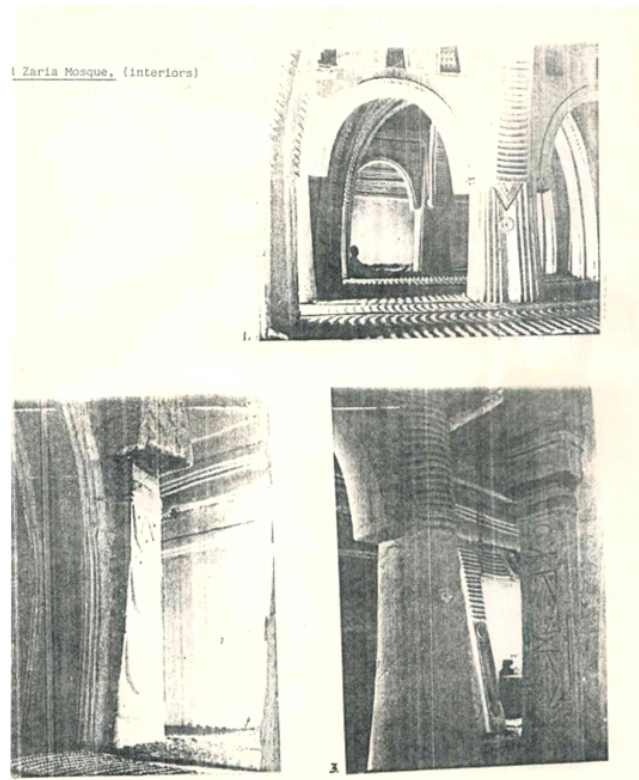


Fig. 1: Zaria Mosque (Interiors) © ARCHIVES

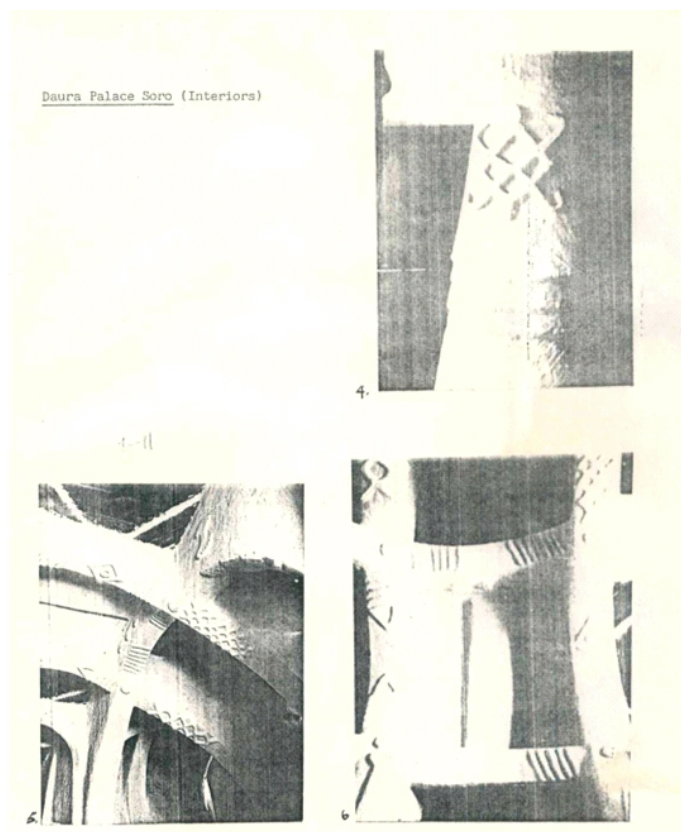


Fig. 2: Zaria mosque (Interiors) © Archives

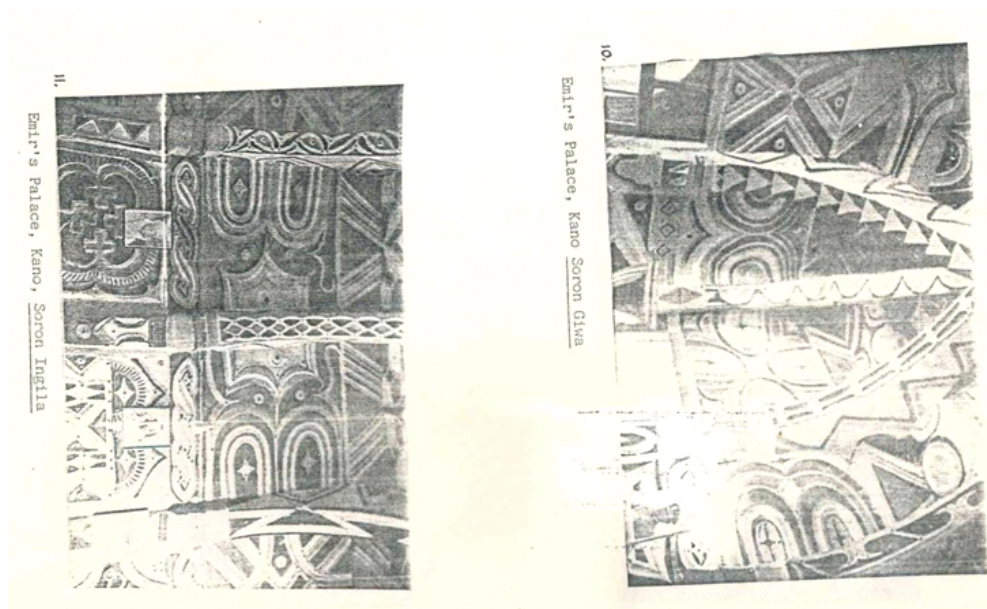


Fig. 3: Emirs Palace, Kano (Soron Ingila) © Archives

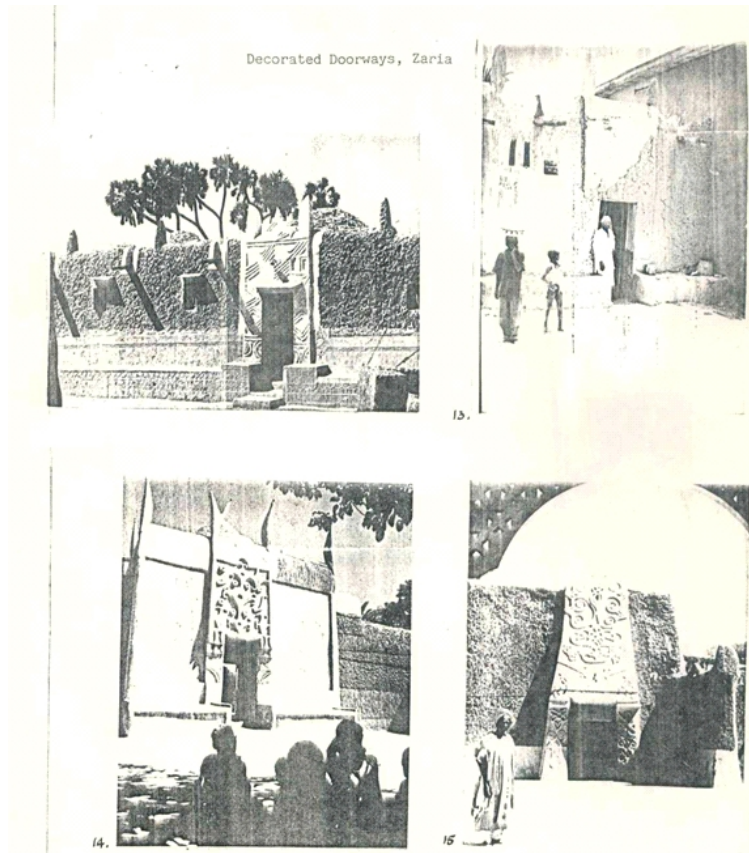


Fig. 4, 5, & 6: Decorated Doorways, © African Arts Journal