

## **Traditional Hausa Architecture: The Exterior and its Decorations**

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### **Abstract**

Throughout Hausaland, elaborately modelled decorative patterns of different styles, rich and sumptuous degrees of boldness have been employed to enhance architectural exterior forms. Hausa exterior architectural decorations are like other Islamic architectural decorations of which Dalu Jones (,19/8:144,) says: Islamic decoration covers buildings like a mantle, its purpose is to conceal the structure rather than reveal it. The elements of decorations are mostly limited to calligraphy, geometry and foliation, but their manipulation results in a rich and sumptuous effect” this essay, therefore engages documentary oral evidence to discourse the varied wall decorations to attempt an explanation that effect their meanings. Also, direct conversations g\have been useful to initiate oral explanations for individual morals. Photography made documentary evidence of this disappearing art form

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### **Background to the Study**

According to Moughtin (1988, 125) the decoration of Hausa buildings reached a zenith in the city of Zaria in the works of Baban Gwani, Mallam Mukaila, during the mid nineteenth century (See Plates) and flowered there again from the 1970s to the 1980s. However, each Hausa emirate has made its distinctive contribution to this art form. Buildings in the palace grounds in Kano clearly indicate Kano's distinctive colorful exuberant style. The style according to one scholar may be dated to the early twentieth century. The finest examples of Hausa wall decorations may appear to have been lost, damaged or destroyed during annual restoration of the mud walls. And with the introduction of cement mortar, sumptuous designs may have been abandoned altogether. The days of high fashion have simply gone with the wind. Today, position in society is no longer emphasised by distinctive and elaborately designed entrance portals. But all is not lost. A recent trip up country did point out that distinctive regional styles more receptive to classic Islamic international style is becoming increasingly popular. The Tatawa BaLewa Mausolleum Bauchi is a standard in the new style (See Plate 3b).

### **Process and General Meaning**

in the classical Hausa architecture, wall decoration was an integral part of the building process. It was usually the work of the master builders; usually carried out as the last phase of the construction process. The simplest type of wall decoration in Hausaland is made by repetitive mechanical hand movements on the freshly plastered surfaces of mud-walls. This type of decoration, usually referred to as zane, design, is a common feature of all finished walls. As the builder proceeded from ground level upwards, he usually applies this hand sweeping finish motif as a composite finish on the wet mud wall (See Plate 3).

A similar form of mechanical decoration is applied when makuba is used in a wall finish. Makuba is effectively employed as a waterproof surface for mud walls. Makuba - is made from the fruit of the locust bean tree (dorowa), *Parkia tilicoidia*. The husk of the tree is ground to a powder, mixed with water and red earth added to produce a watery paste. This purpose brown pastry solution is applied with bold circular sweeps of the arm to the wall. The resultant patterning is distinctive. This plaster when dry is prone to white ant attacks. Usually a mechanical rhythmic movement of the arm is employed, using the side of the hand to produce a series of shallow troughs. These two methods give an overall glossy pattern in the Savanna sunshine of the area.

The perimeter wall of a compound as the interface between the inside and the outside worlds, the known and the unknown, private and public space, has one overall meaning: It communicates to the outsider facts of ownership and extensive patterning. But this explanation does not account for the wealth of similar mechanical patterning inside the households themselves. Hausa society was a visibly stratified society. Beyond the display of grandiose architecture, it became fashionable to further distinguish one's status and social standing by way of elaborate visual tableau on facades of dwelling homes and turaka walls. At the turn of the nineteenth century commercial emirate centres like Zaria, sanctioned wall decorations as the preserve of the rulers, their scions and kinsmen, the wealthy. The Talakawa

fsg Talaka) linked to the rulers through clientship and patronage were not permitted to express themselves in this way. The propriety of modesty was their lot. Prestige amidst the commoners was met out according to rank; with the clerics and koranics scholars leading the bandwagon, merchants and craftsmen following. Tradesmen were accorded the lowest rung in the social ladder. Ostentatious display items of clothes and palatial decoration were thus a measure of social position, especially in the fundun Wada quarters. With increased commercial prosperity therefore the patronage of master builders increased with the attendant consequence of more creativity and fantasy in the art of wall decoration.

The art of wall decorations therefore must be viewed from the standpoint of the changing physical',, record of social, economic and political forces within Hausa society at a time when the norms of communication were themselves undergoing changes. However, the evidence measuring changes in decorative style during the nineteenth century remain the documents of European travelers and colonial administrators across the land and the few remaining mud edifices themselves. Today only the Daura palace Zaure remains.

Surface maintenance of Hausa mud walls is an annual event. Mud walls must simply be reinforced on a yearly basis if they may see through the rainy seasons. Therefore, I think patterning is a simple expression of this ritual. It is therefore significant to note the special care put into the decorations of critical weak points of the wall surface, parapets, the crossing points of arches and doorways.

I noticed in my recent field trip that such critical points were not only repaired but also enveloped in protective symbols. Openings in walls, particularly the entrances to Zaure of private dwelling homes, turaka walls and entrances to palace council chambers) are visibly fortified with these prophylactic symbols.

For as the Scholar Prussia notes:

*Any enclosed space, whether physical or conceptual requires an opening: the corollary of meaningful spatial definition of an enclosed space is an entrance into it. The entrance is the mediator; it marks the point where man makes the transition between exterior and interior, between the known and the unknown.*

Throughout West Africa, all rites and rituals relating to change and transition in man's existence occur at the entrance.

Outdooring or naming ceremonies announcing the birth of a child, are performed at the entrances to the compound. Funerary rites take place at the compound entrances and strangers are received in the antechambers at the entrance to the compound'. Quintessentially therefore all decorations are concentrated at the entrance portals and facades in traditional Hausa Islamic architecture (See Plates: 12) There is only one entrance to a Hausa compound. Some motifs employed in Hausa wall decorations may be associated with vistas of her pre-Islamic past. Many motifs modelled in relief or archetypical cone and cylinder mud-walled structures have very distinctive non-Islamic connotations. The most common are zoomorphic.

The style of these decorative images is either naturalistic, highly stylized or conventionalized geometric symbols (See Plates). Islam is usually said to frown at ostentatious decoration incorporating figures of living creatures. It must be argued that man has always incorporated totemism in his exploration of the meaning and purposes of existence. Simple geometric shapes - triangles, circles and lozenges which are employed in Hausa decorations are also popular amongst other indigenous Nigerian peoples: The Yoruba, Ibo, etcetera.

Leary is of the view that some of the simple decorations in the older Hausa dwellings resemble Tuareg fertility charms based on circles and triangles. These are known as talhatana. Prussin is of the view that with the introduction of Islam, Islamic symbolism replaced indigenous symbolisms. She sees this process as a supernatural insurance policy with Islam." According to this view the new symbolism is based upon the script of the Holy book. It is believed to have sacred and magical powers. This, power is further enhanced by its embossment in a system of cabalistic formulae derived from Islamic mathematics and divinationary powers. Many wall patterns in Hausaland are characteristically organised into rectangular formations. This seems a standard. (See Plates: 14-18). Prussin's view calls for scholarly consideration, scrutiny and serious study.

However, in dealing with delicate issues of the fusion of Islam and pre-Islamic traditions, it would be wise to bear in mind Tringham's (1966) apt warning that:

*'It is easy to exaggerate the influences of Islam and northern Hamites. Without going to the extreme and minimizing the efficacy of Hamitic influences preceding Islam in modifying the original data, the broad fact remains that these Negro civilizations with their own distinctive character... Nor do we want to minimize the effect of Islamic civilization. It is not enough to take the two ingredients, the pagan culture and Islam and consider change simply as a kind of quantitative transposition .... for that would miss the creative and dynamic factor - the two forces reacting upon each other ... the ultimate synthesis.'*

It is erroneously held that Islamization of Hausaland in Northern Nigeria began only with the zealous reformation of the 19th century. A popular tradition is that the Islamic faith was introduced into Hausaland in the 13th century by Malian Merchants. Islamic law must have been peripheral in the day to day life of the bulk of the Hausa peoples. This early Islamization might have paved the way; for the effective de facto Islamization must have been possible after the first decade of the 19th century. Islam's so-called taboos in respect to imagery could only have been effective in the years of zealous reformation. The orthodox tenets may have been only superficially imposed, if at all. Accordingly, Bravmann (1983) emphasizes the assimilation of both indigenous concepts, cultural values and contiguous elements by Islamized Hausa peoples in their design vocabulary. Syncretism between Islam and traditional lore seem the true picture.

An early example of Hausa Islamic decoration on a mud-building is the Daura palace Zaure. Tradition claims, it was built by the Habe rulers before the Jihad. Its dominant features are the magnificent structure, lofty space enclosures and the few distinctive patterns, set in a backdrop

of adobe walls. They appear like documentation of Hausa history: on the soffit of one arch is the snake.

The traditional story of Hausa origins claims that Bayejida, the founding father of the Hausa states, killed a snake at Daura. On one of the columns is the crescent, the symbol of Islam, and on another the lizard symbol, a significant totem of pre-Islamic times. Beneath the springing of the arches are simple geometric shapes locally associated to charms. Two socio-political phases can be read from the symbols: a change from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society, closely associated with the Bayeji invasions and the gradual transition from an animistic society to the monotheistic Islamic state.

Architectural scholars point to the decorations on the Zaria Friday Mosque as the other major example. It was built by Baban Gwani Mallam Mukaila. The mud relief patterns are formal and sober; significant of an age rite with religion. Its decorations are the very antithesis of the arabesque spirals, interlacing knots and chevrons of later work (Moughton 1983, 134) From the little evidence available, it appears that external decorative murals in Hausaland were a phenomenon that must be associated with the stability and economic progress, prestige and urban cultural pride of the 20th century city states. For in the 19th century, the soro, common hut was a significant statement of social position. The most important to the emirate was the Friday Mosque and the palace.

Although the royalty continued the traditions of their ancestors, displaying more finesse, prudence and good taste; in twentieth century Hausaland, the new burst of decoration was characteristic of the abode of the nouveau-riche: the prosperous trader and wealthy women of easy virtues; rather than the royalty, aristocracy and the administrative classes. Twentieth Century style decoration became more geometric, simple and austere. Examples may be found in Zaria public buildings. The traditions and practices of the guild systems continued. The story of wall decoration in Zaria and Kano, is replete with the facts of patronage. Specific guild masters are still chronicled in association with particular buildings.

Contemporary icons have also been incorporated in wall decorations. For example, the distinctive bicycle in 'the Bicycle House, Zaria, decorated by Jibrin Dan Abubakar. Besides, in the decade of the 1960s and 1970s two quite distinct types of wall decorations were prominent. First there was traditional ornamentation traceable to the late 18th century; then a new repetitive pattern (Moughtin, 198b, 144). The first group was a product of celebrated master builder family traditions. It was conservative but faithful to the canons of the old masters. The latter was the Shegege group which are specifically more geometric and international in derivation. The Shegege were the younger generation of builders. With their predominant linear characteristics, these murals must have synthesized forms and patterns from the memories of travels and pilgrimage. The Hausa have been known from time immemorial to be keen businessmen and travelers along the great trade routes and the Hausaland.

The decorations employed by builders in Hausaland; the spirals and interlacing knots typical of embodied patterns on the rich garments of rulers and the aristocracy, have much in

common. Certainly, it is true Hausa leatherwork and embroidery employed patterns similar to those of the mud-wall architectural decorations; north African Islamic influences cannot be ruled out. Prussin endorses the view that much of the impetus for Hausa decoration with respect to symbolisms have strong Islamic derivations; yet in character and in spirit mud-wall architectural decorations of the period have a distinct Hausa touch, it is very African. The basic elements- triangles, lozenges and circles - are common in Nigerian art and craft design traditions.

The Shegege wall architectural decorations extend beyond the doorway. It extends over the whole facade. Predominant motifs here are basic icons of the faith and contemporary society. Therefore, the ablution kettle, buta, the Koranic slate, Alo and other artifacts associated with Islam were significant. Moreover, the house owner's profession was duly represented with symbolic artifacts: a lorry or motor car for the driver; a sewing machine for the tailor, et cetera. Even the tact of pilgrimage to Mecca was significantly represented by an aeroplane and a citation from the Islamic holy book, the Alkoran. Highly modelled 2-dimensionnal decorations still dominate the doorway and entrance portals. The rest of the wall patterning is usually made of less expensive repetitive 'scratched off' patterns. The layout decoration consists of broad patterns imitating the jointing in brick/stone construction. Geometricity abides. Wall corners, parapets are often picked out in white, flowers and other motifs in pale pastels.

On the whole Hausa wall decorations and embellishments present a rich focus for iconographic study. The portals and facades as indicated represent lines of demarcation to the visitor, the division between private and public space zones; and the points of transition, hallowed and threatening. However, no attempt has been made to interpret the meanings of the motifs employed by the early builders. I have only attempted an analysis of the 20th century conservative and the Shegege schools. In general, the two schools correspond to the architectural styles of the north and south Hausaland). The northern lighter with decorations appearing as ribbons on the surface s; the southern more robust, deeply incised and exuberant. An overall look at Hausa wall decorations signifies four phases of development. These are the designs which derived from the preIslamic era; the century master builder designs, | and the conservative Shegege designs of the 20th century.

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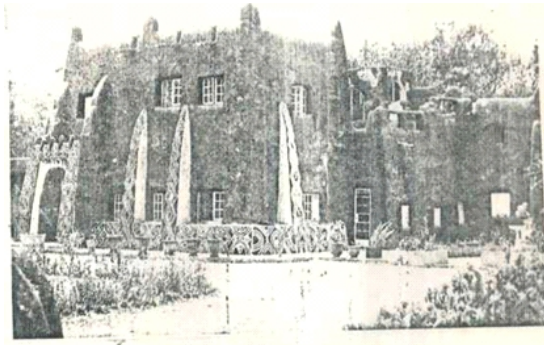
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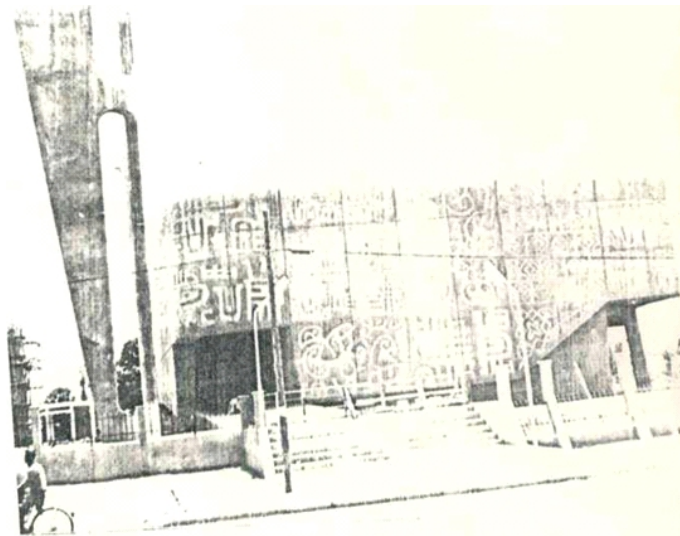
Fig. 1



Fig. 2

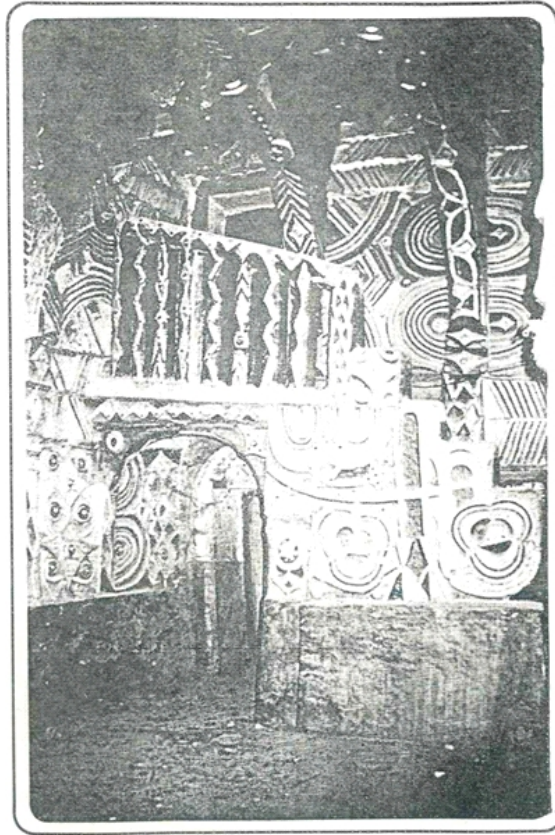


**Fig. 3:** Gidan Dan Hausa, Kano



**Fig. 4:** Tafawa Balewa Mausoleum, Bauchi





**Fig. 5:** Mallow's Room in the Panisau Country Palace, Kano Emir soffit: sets of three intersecting arches with molded red earth panels set off against revealed palmwood infilling members. (David Aradeou)