

Role of Cultural Identity and Symbolism in the Evolution of Hausa Traditional Building Pattern

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Abstract: Hausa traditional architecture serves as a profound expression of cultural identity and symbolism, reflecting the values, beliefs, and socio-cultural structure of the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria. This study examines the role of cultural identity and symbolic representation in shaping the Hausa traditional building pattern. Using systematic literature review, the research explores key architectural features such as spatial organization, building form, construction materials, decorative motifs, and symbolic elements associated with the Hausa traditional built environment. It also examines the influence of cultural and religious beliefs, historical continuity, and communal living practices on design choices and spatial arrangements. The study Findings revealed that Hausa traditional buildings are not merely functional structures but are deeply connected with symbolic meanings that reflect status, spirituality, social order, and communal living. The study further highlighted how indigenous construction techniques and ornamentation serve as cultural markers, reinforcing a sense of identity and continuity. By analyzing the relationship between identity and form, the research emphasized the importance of preserving Hausa architectural heritage as a means of sustaining cultural identity and promoting architectural diversity within Nigeria. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how symbolism and cultural values continue to influence traditional architectural expressions in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, symbolism, building Pattern, traditional architecture, Hausa*

1. Introduction

Traditional architecture represents an inherited mode of building that has been transmitted across generations, embodying the accepted norms and practices of specific communities (Rikko & Gwatau, 2011; Okoye & Ukanwa, 2019). In the African context, it serves as a tangible expression of cultural values, beliefs, and social systems. These architectural forms are closely linked to ethnic identities and reflect the diversity of practices across different groups. In Nigeria, a country characterized by its multi-ethnic composition, traditional architecture exhibits distinct regional variations shaped by cultural, environmental, and socio-religious factors. Regions such as the North, Middle Belt, West, East, and South display unique housing typologies that correspond to their respective cultural settings. These variations have evolved over time, influenced by broader developments such as technological progress, cultural exchange, and urbanization (Astrolabe, 2002). During the pre-colonial period, architectural expressions across Nigerian societies were largely determined by religious practices, social structures, and environmental factors, including vegetation and topography (Uchegbu, 2007).

Architectural forms have historically been associated with specific groups or civilizations, such as the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, or Chinese, each having developed distinctive structures for particular uses. For instance, while monumental temples in China adopt a tiered pyramidal form, simpler linear structures are often employed for domestic buildings. In America, wooden constructions have become emblematic of rural housing typologies (Astrolabe, 2002). Contemporary research indicates that the architectural heritage of Nigeria's ethnic groups offers understanding for improving the modern built environment. The use of indigenous design principles, materials, and construction methods can enhance spatial quality, climate responsiveness, and cultural relevance in today's architecture (Ilesanmi & Egbe, 2013; Adedokun, 2014; Okoye & Ukanwa, 2019; Adenaike et al., 2020). However, the decline in the application of traditional design strategies has contributed to several socio-environmental challenges, particularly in urban contexts (Ezezue & Diogu, 2016; Dayaratne, 2018). In response, scholars have

called for the reintegration of indigenous knowledge systems in architectural practice to address sustainability and identity-related concerns (Rikko & Gwatau, 2011; Ekhaese et al., 2015; Okoye & Ukanwa, 2019).

A growing body of scholarly works in Sub-saharan Africa highlights the importance of traditional architecture, especially in regions where colonial legacies and modernization pressures have contributed to the erosion of vernacular forms. In Nigeria, studies have addressed aspects of Northern architecture, with particular attention to the Hausa tradition. For instance, Dmochowsky (1990) documented the principal attributes of Hausa architectural style, while Umar (2017) and Umar et al. (2019) explored its evolution and changing practices. Nonetheless, limited research has been directed at understanding how Hausa cultural values and heritage specifically shape the development of its architectural features. This study, therefore, undertakes a literature-based investigation into the influence of cultural identity and symbolic expression on the evolution of Hausa traditional building pattern. It seeks to contribute to the discourse on cultural continuity and architectural heritage by examining: (i) the cultural foundations of Hausa society, (ii) the characteristic features of traditional Hausa building pattern, and (iii) the core values associated with traditional Hausa building pattern.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Architecture as an Expression of Cultural Identity

In any society structured by a guiding ideology and system of governance, defined goals and collective aspirations are fundamental elements. Culture operates as the medium through which abstract ideas and worldviews are translated into physical realities. Architecture, as a functional and expressive discipline, plays a central role in this process, transforming undifferentiated space into environments of meaning and aesthetic value through spatial articulation and form. It has long served as a reliable expression of a people's cultural identity. Geroter (2007) emphasized that while a society may excel in producing fine furnishings and ornamental objects, the consistent production of poorly executed buildings reflects a

deeper dysfunction. Such a disconnect signals a breakdown in order and institutional coherence. Geroter further posited that every building represents a material embodiment of a conceptual framework; it is an expression of the prevailing mental constructs of a society. In this view, architecture transcends its physical function, serving as a spiritual and cultural artifact. Each structure, therefore, becomes a vessel through which the values (positive or negative) of a society are communicated and preserved.

2.2. Cultural Influence on the Formation of Architectural Identity

Beyond language, norms, values, and social rule, core elements of any cultural system lies another significant dimension: the material aspect of culture. This dimension, which is linked to a society's belief systems and value structures, plays a central role in shaping the built environment. Architecture, in this context, becomes a direct manifestation of material culture. Parhizgar (2020) metaphorically described a building as a "dust-covered book," whose forms and spaces contain narratives waiting to be interpreted. Through such interpretations, one gains an understanding into the cultural ethos and societal conditions under which the structure was conceived. The dynamic relationship between culture and architecture suggests that cultural transformations inevitably lead to shifts in architectural theories and forms. This process results in the emergence of new architectural expressions influenced by evolving cultural frameworks (Diba, 1999). Every society's architecture is thus rooted in its unique cultural context, making architecture not only a utilitarian practice but also a material embodiment of cultural identity. As noted by Emusa (2024), the spatial organization within a built environment is strongly shaped by the cultural orientation of the society that produces it.

2.3. Historical Background of Hausa People

Nigeria is situated at the northeastern edge of the Gulf of Guinea, along the western coastline of the African continent. The country spans a total land area of approximately 923,768 square kilometers, stretching about 1,127 kilometers from east to west and 1,046 kilometers from north to south. The Hausa ethnic group predominantly occupies the northern region of Nigeria, geographically positioned between latitudes 10.5° to 14.0° North

and longitudes 3.5° to 11.0° East, as illustrated in Figure 1. Kano, one of the most prominent urban centers in this region, serves as the cultural and commercial hub of Hausa civilization. Other key Hausa-populated cities include Sokoto, Zaria, and Katsina. The Hausa people communicate primarily in the Hausa language, which has been significantly influenced by Arabic, particularly in its vocabulary and script, due to historical interactions through trade and the spread of Islam.

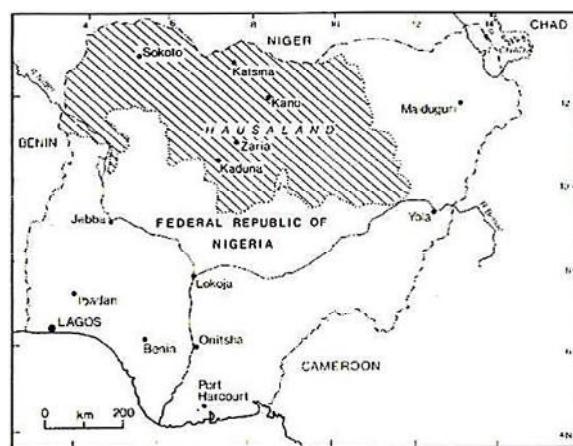


Figure 1: Map of Nigeria Showing Northern Nigeria Occupied by the Hausa.

Source: Land and survey department Kano (2005).

The Hausa people historically occupied the expansive northern plains beyond the Jos Plateau, a region strategically positioned as a crossroads linking Borno in the northeast to the territories of ancient Mali and Songhai in the western Sudan. According to Emusa (2024), The Hausas established a number of centralized and politically organized city-states, including Daura, Katsina, Kano, Zaria (Zazzau), Gobir, and later Kebbi. These states collectively formed the core of what is historically referred to as the Hausa Bakwai or "Seven True Hausa States," which included Biram, Daura, Gobir, Katsina, Kano, Rano, and Zaria. Each of these feudal city-states was typically fortified with walls, structured around a central marketplace, and governed through a monarchical system. The introduction of Islam in the 14th century via trans-Saharan influences from the Mali Empire further reinforced monarchical authority and urban religious structures. Although Islam became increasingly dominant in the cities, it remained largely an urban faith until the 19th

century, with many pre-Islamic rites persisting as part of royal and communal ceremonies that legitimized political authority.

The 19th-century Fulani Jihad, led by Usman dan-Fodio, marked a major shift in the political and religious structure of the region. Many Hausa peasants aligned themselves with the Fulani movement, resulting in the integration of Hausa territories into a series of emirates governed under Islamic law. By the early 20th century, British colonial authorities consolidated these emirates along with the neighboring Borno region into the Northern Provinces of the Protectorate of Nigeria. Originally practitioners of animism, the Hausa population gradually embraced Islam, which now constitutes the predominant organized religion. Linguistically, the Hausa language is the most widely spoken and best-known member of the Chadic subfamily within the Afro-Asiatic language family. Due to Islamic and commercial influences, Arabic also became widely understood and integrated, particularly in religious, scholarly, and trade contexts. Kano, the preeminent Hausa city in northern Nigeria, is widely regarded as the cultural and economic capital of Hausa society. Hausa culture is characterized by a high degree of specialization and economic diversification. Subsistence agriculture forms the foundation of their livelihood, with intensive cultivation of crops such as sorghum, millet, and maize practiced in rotational systems that utilize manure from Fulani cattle herds. Agricultural surplus has enabled the development of various traditional crafts, including leatherworking, dyeing, weaving, silver-smithing, and thatching. The Hausas are also known for their extensive trading networks, particularly in leather goods and artisanal products, often catering to both local and tourist markets (Agboola & Zango, 2014).

2.4. Hausa Culture

In traditional Hausa society, culture is deeply rooted in kinship systems and social hierarchies that govern daily interactions and community structure. As noted by Olotuah (2001), culture comprises habitual behaviours that are expressed in the distinct ways individuals organize themselves into complex societal groups. These groups perform specialized functions and produce creative expressions in various forms, including art and architecture. Olotuah further emphasized that housing functions are deeply associated with the cultural and customary frameworks of a people.

Religion, lifestyle, dress codes, and interactions with external groups are all interrelated components of cultural identity. In Hausa society, cultural behaviour reflects an organized system where individuals engage in structured interactions aimed at sustaining social cohesion and livelihood. Olotuah (2001) identified three core cultural dimensions particularly relevant to the Hausa.

i. Norms and Taboos: Hausa behavioural patterns are strongly influenced by ancestral traditions and social inheritance. These cultural norms and taboos shape their worldview and decision-making processes, particularly regarding conflict resolution, governance, and family life. Such inherited customs often dictate acceptable behaviour and societal expectations within the community.

ii. Ideas, Values, and Religion: The Hausa people are unified by a common language and the Islamic faith, which has played a pivotal role in shaping their built environment and social practices. The introduction of Islam into Hausa land in the 14th century significantly influenced architectural traditions, including the adoption of curvilinear and conical forms, as well as mud dome roofing systems. Religious values also reinforce the principle of purdah (the seclusion of women) which manifests architecturally in the layout of traditional compounds. Gender segregation, as prescribed by Islamic doctrine, has led to the widespread use of internal courtyards, where women's activities are kept private from public view.

iii. Occupations and Aesthetic Expression: Economically, the Hausa are predominantly involved in agriculture and ornamentation-based crafts. Traditional artistic practices including calabash carving, fabric dyeing, and textile design, which are deeply rooted in their cultural identity and have profoundly influenced architectural decoration. Façades of Hausa buildings are often adorned with motifs and symbolic patterns that reflect this ornamental heritage. A significant portion of the population also engages in trade and craftsmanship, further reflecting the connection between economic activity and cultural expression. Hausa culture is a dynamic synthesis of spiritual beliefs, aesthetic values, and social norms, all of which are reflected in the region's distinctive architectural forms and patterns of settlement.

2.5. Traditional Architecture in Northern Nigeria

Traditional architecture in Northern Nigeria reflects a deep relationship between environment, culture, and lifestyle, resulting in two predominant typologies that correspond to the settled and nomadic populations of the region. Among the Hausa, whose settlements are largely permanent, architecture is defined by strong, enduring structures that formed homesteads, and are both functionally and symbolically influenced by Islamic traditions (Hussaini, 1999). These homesteads, especially prominent in urban settings, frequently incorporate the courtyard model, which although widely associated with Islamic architecture, predates the advent of Islam in the 7th century AD, as evidenced in earlier spatial configurations across the Arabian Peninsula (Friedrich, 1982). In contrast, the Fulani, a predominantly nomadic group, construct highly mobile and ephemeral shelters using lightweight natural materials such as reeds, leaves, and elephant grass. The architectural impermanence observed in Fulani settlements reflects their seasonal migration patterns and reliance on easily sourced, transportable construction materials (Hussaini, 1999). Both architectural expressions are shaped not only by climatic conditions but also by religious beliefs, cultural norms, and socio-economic realities. In more densely populated urban areas, considerations such as land availability, security, and access to building resources have further influenced the evolution of traditional forms. Extending into the North-Central zone, commonly referred to as the Middle Belt, architectural diversity becomes more pronounced. Ethnic groups such as the Tiv, Igala, Tarok, Berom, Ngas, Kutep, Gbagyi, and Baju exhibit distinctive architectural identities. While certain stylistic elements such as curvilinear spatial arrangements are shared across these groups, marked differences persist in compound organization and construction techniques, underscoring the unique socio-cultural and environmental contexts in which these structures are conceived (Rikko & Gwatau, 2011).

2.5.1 Traditional Hausa Settlement Pattern

Traditional Hausa architecture in Northern Nigeria is shaped by a combination of religious influence, cultural values, climatic conditions, and the use of locally available materials. The layout of

settlements and the structure of family compounds reflect the cultural identity and social organization of the people. Central features within Hausa communities typically include the emir's palace, the mosque, and the market. The emir's palace functions as the seat of authority and governance, while the mosque plays a central role in religious life. The market serves as a key location for commercial activity and social interaction, drawing people from both within and outside the community (Auwalu, 2019). In Hausa society, the difference between rural and urban environments is often minimal. Urban areas are viewed as extensions of the rural landscape, a form of settlement arrangement known locally as *Anguwan*, which closely resembles traditional village patterns (Sa'ad, 1986). This approach to urban development reflects the continuity of rural traditions within larger settlements and demonstrates how Hausa communities maintain cultural and spatial consistency across different settings. According to Popoola (1984), traditional rural settlements in Hausa regions are often formed as compact village clusters, some of which continue to grow in scale. Remnants of defensive walls still outline many older villages, indicating their historical significance. However, newer rural communities tend to be more dispersed in form, reflecting gradual changes in spatial organization while maintaining connections to earlier, more centralized layouts. This evolution captures a transition in settlement practices, shaped by both cultural continuity and emerging spatial needs.

In Hausa geography, human settlements can be broadly categorized into three main types, each reflecting a specific level of social and architectural development. The first is the *Kauaye*, or village, which refers to agrarian communities in rural areas. These villages are typically composed of matrilineally linked families who reside in compact clusters for farming purposes. Agricultural lands, known as *Gona*, are situated around these settlements and are clearly defined, often separated from neighboring villages (*Kwauyika*) by undeveloped land or forest belts (*Daji*). Urban populations often regard *Kauaye* with a rural identity, sometimes distancing themselves from its traditional associations. The second category is *Gari*, a term for towns that are larger and more diverse than villages. These towns accommodate various family lineages and even non-relatives, forming more heterogeneous populations.

Internally, *Gari* is structured into divisions called *Anguwanji*, which are based on shared religious practices, kinship, or occupation. The emergence and expansion of such towns are often linked to fertile land availability or sacred sites that attract settlers. Notably, early *Gari* developments were not fortified at inception; protective walls, where present, were typically constructed as a response to later threats (Popoola, 1984).

The most advanced form of Hausa settlement is the *Birni*, or city. A *Birni* serves as a regional or political capital and is typically enclosed by fortified walls. These cities often functioned as administrative or commercial centers and provided refuge in times of insecurity. A typical *Birni* consists of three concentric zones: the innermost zone (*Cikin Gari*), the central area (*Tsakiyar Gari*), and the outer ring (*Wajen Gari*). These zones are enclosed by strong perimeter walls called *Ganuwa*, with controlled access points known as *Kofa* (Sa'ad, 1986). The classification of Hausa settlements into these three categories reflects not only patterns of physical growth but also broader aspects of social organization and cultural identity. This hierarchy is also mirrored within the spatial logic of traditional Hausa homes, where the division of domestic space corresponds to larger urban layouts. Thus, household architecture serves as a smaller reflection of the larger settlement structure, illustrating how spatial planning principles operate across multiple levels of Hausa society.

2.5.2. Traditional Hausa Compound Layout

In the urban centers of Northern Nigeria, traditional Hausa residential compounds are designed to prioritize privacy and follow a carefully ordered spatial arrangement that becomes increasingly private toward the inner areas. These compounds are typically enclosed by perimeter walls made from mud, although in some cases, woven grass fences referred to as *Zana* are used as alternatives. A key architectural feature is the *Zaure*, a covered entrance porch that serves as a buffer between the public domain of the street and the private family residence. The *Zaure* functions both as a reception area and a point of control, particularly important in homes shared by extended families (Fig. 2). (Sa'ad, 1996).

The architectural form of Hausa dwellings is predominantly rectangular, although variations

exist, such as the use of circular structures in places like Zaria. The overall design falls within the 'Sudanese' architectural tradition, common across the savannah belt of West Africa, particularly in areas near the Niger and Chad river basins (Fatiregun, 1999). A defining characteristic of the Hausa compound is the central courtyard, which is enclosed by multiple rooms. This layout supports family growth by enabling future additions to the building, such as rooms for new wives or children. The open courtyard also plays a significant role in daily activities, including religious observance and social interaction. Consistent with Islamic cultural practices, the design includes a clear division between male and female areas within the home. Women's quarters are arranged around the courtyard and are typically off-limits to men who are not members of the family. This spatial arrangement supports the observance of *purdah*, the cultural and religious practice of female seclusion, which continues to shape both social behaviour and residential design in Hausa communities (Agboola & Zango, 2014).

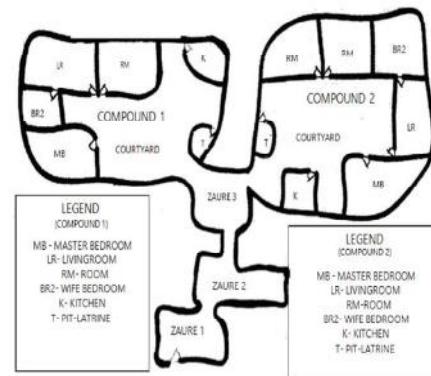


Figure 2: Typical Hausa Traditional Compound at Dan-Dago, Kano Municipal.
Source: Umar (2018).

In Hausa traditional architecture, the *Zaure* functions as more than a physical entrance. It serves as a socially and religiously significant space that defines permissible levels of interaction between household members and outsiders. This space is essentially multifunctional, often hosting a variety of activities including receiving guests, ensuring security, and serving as the venue for ceremonies such as weddings and naming events. In some cases, the *Zaure* also carries ornamental value and administrative significance within the compound (Adamu, 2005; Osasona, 2007).

Immediately following the *Zaure* is the *kofar gida*, a semi-public courtyard that acts as an intermediate zone between the entrance and the more private sections of the home. This area is designed to limit access to adult male visitors, restricting entry primarily to close kin and trusted associates of the household head (Sa'ad, 1996). Located near this transitional space is the *Shigifa*, a private reception room where the *maigida* (the male head of the household) meets informally with family members and selected guests. The *Shigifa* serves as a connecting node between the outer and inner parts of the compound. At the heart of the compound lies the *cikin gida*, the innermost and most private section, reserved primarily for the women of the household. This area includes the personal quarters of married women, kitchens, children's activity spaces, storage rooms, and other domestic functions central to daily life. The layout and spatial hierarchy of this zone are intended to facilitate the wellbeing of women, children, and female visitors, while ensuring their privacy and security in accordance with religious and cultural practices.

2.5.3. Traditional Hausa Building Materials and Construction Techniques

In Hausa traditional architecture, builders primarily depend on natural materials gathered from the immediate surroundings. The most important among these are earth, wood, grasses and reeds, as well as stone (Moughtin, 1985; Dmochowski, 1990). Earth is the most dominant material, often used in the form of locally made bricks called *tubali*. These bricks are shaped from reddish soil known as *Jankasa*, which is widely available across the region. Once water is added, the mixture is molded by hand and left in the sun to dry until it becomes firm and ready for construction (Osasona, 2007). Each *tubali* brick has a rounded body with a narrow tip, and they are usually arranged vertically with the pointed ends facing upward. This method reflects a well-established local practice that produces walls with a strong and sculpted appearance (Fig. 3). Builders begin by digging foundations to a depth of roughly 400 to 600 millimetres to avoid unstable surface soil and to create a firm base. The walls are then raised with thick bases of around 600 millimetres, which gradually become slimmer near the top where the thickness reduces to about 200 millimetres. This reduction in wall thickness is not

only practical for carrying the building load but also helps to regulate indoor temperatures during extreme weather. To assemble the bricks, a smooth mud paste is prepared and applied between each layer to hold them in place. Construction usually starts with several layers at the base and fewer towards the top, creating a stable and insulated structure. This method can still be seen in the old city of Kano, where many traditional buildings are made with this technique. The thick earth walls found there are not just strong and comfortable for living but also affordable, thanks to the easy access to materials and the local workforce that carries out the construction (Umar et al., 2019).

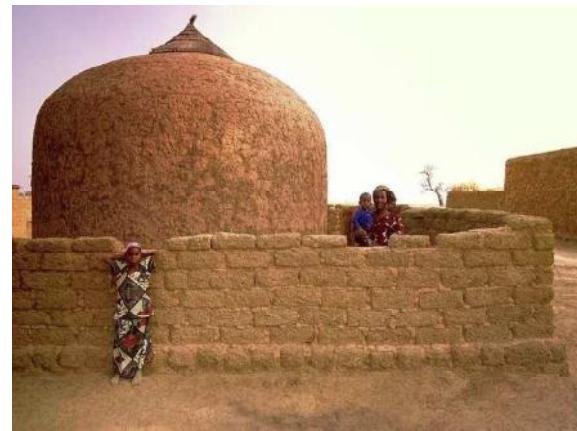


Figure 3: Tubali Used in Construction of Wall.

Source: Adrianna (2018).

Top of Form

Mud, which is derived from puddled laterite plays a central role in traditional Hausa construction, especially in the development of roofing systems. In smaller rooms with spans around 1.8 meters, the roof is typically formed by placing mud directly over wooden beams known as *Azara*, which are supported by mud walls on both sides. For wider rooms, ranging from 2.7 to 5 meters, builders extend the roof by projecting layers of mud out from the top edges of the walls. These overhanging sections measure roughly 45 centimeters and are reinforced with *Azara* beams to strengthen the span. In even larger rooms where the width reaches up to 4 meters, *Azara* timbers are carefully arranged either along the length of the room or across it diagonally to carry the weight of the roof (Sa'ad, 1986). In spaces that require additional

support, vertical posts are introduced and joined together with *Azara* beams to form a strong network. This framework allows roof sections between beams to be filled in with smaller spans of *Azara*, completing the overhead covering. These wooden members are also important in shaping various elements such as frames, support arms, and the stepped platforms used in both flat and rounded roofs. The traditional domed roof, known locally as *Tulluwa*, is one of the most recognized features in Hausa architecture.

Another prominent feature is the use of *Zankwaye*, which are tall pointed forms that extend from the top of the walls. These elements provide builders with footholds during roof work and maintenance, adding both function and style to the structure (Fig. 4). To make the roof weather-resistant, a layer of fine ash from burnt timber is spread across the surface. Additionally, natural waterproofing methods are applied using solutions extracted from plant pods or roots (Dmochowski, 1990).

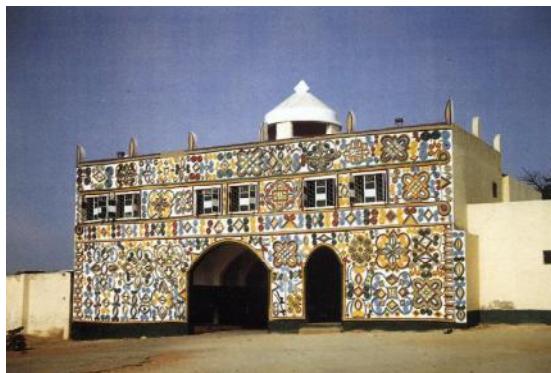


Figure 4: Typical Traditional Hausa House showing Decorative Façade and Pinnacles.

Source: Adeyemi, (2008) & Garba (2003).

In many Hausa towns, the use of flat or arched mud roofs is a deliberate architectural decision aimed at addressing two major concerns. Firstly, these roof types help regulate indoor temperatures, especially in regions where daytime heat contrasts sharply with cooler nights. Secondly, they serve as a protective measure against urban fires, which historically posed a significant threat in densely populated areas. As a result, city authorities encouraged the abandonment of thatched roofing, which is highly flammable. This policy distinction led to notable differences between architectural practices in urban and rural communities. In city settings, buildings are typically rectangular and

roofed with mud, while in rural areas, homes often retain round layouts with thatched covers (Fig. 5). The introduction of foreign building products, especially those brought from Europe, had a lasting impact on construction methods. Materials like cement and corrugated metal sheets began to replace traditional options. Corrugated metal in particular gained popularity, as it offered better fire resistance and was easier to install on straight walls. Its adoption eventually influenced the way buildings were designed. Many homes that were once circular in form began to shift towards rectangular layouts in order to better support the new roofing material (Agboola and Zango, 2014).



Figure 5: Typical Hausa Traditional Mud House.

Source: Adekeye & Garba (2003).

2.5.4. Traditional Hausa Motifs and decorations

In the northern part of Nigeria, traditional Hausa buildings are often recognized for their richly decorated surfaces, showcasing the skills of local builders and craftsmen. These decorative expressions bring life and beauty to interior spaces through a wide range of artistic techniques and visual details. The walls are commonly adorned with painted vaults, supporting piers, arches, and a range of symbolic and ornamental patterns that reflect both cultural identity and visual appeal. As noted by Adamu (2005), these decorations fall into three main categories: surface embellishments, calligraphic inscriptions, and symbolic designs. Often, a combination of these appears on the entrance structure known as the *Zaure*, with

choices influenced by the owner's social standing and personal style (Fig. 6). One notable technique used in this tradition is known as graffiti. This method involves applying layers of colored plaster and then incising the top surface to expose the colors underneath, producing visually striking results. Denyer (1978) observed that these artistic details are sometimes believed to carry spiritual or protective meanings.

Hausa architecture also features decorative elements on the exterior, including colorful reliefs and flowing patterns that give the buildings a lively appearance. These additions often indicate wealth and community importance, while also enhancing the charm of the surrounding streets. Among such features are the raised shapes known as *Zanko*, which resemble small mud projections found along the roofline. These and other decorative elements are found not only on the outer walls but also on interior spaces such as vaults, entry porches, doors, and windows. According to Sa'ad (1986), the motifs used in these buildings arise from four main techniques. These include shaping wet mud during application, carving into damp cement or mud plaster, applying a specific type of surface finish known as *Makuba*, or painting directly on a plain wall surface. Each of these approaches reflects a deep respect for artistry and tradition, which continue to define Hausa architecture today (Umar et al., 2019).



Figure 6: Traditional Hausa Facade Decoration showing Pinnacles (Zankwaye).

Source: Tofa (2011).

According to Emusa (2024), the decorative symbols and patterns seen in Hausa architecture are not merely aesthetic but often carry deep meanings tied to Islamic beliefs, oral traditions, and cultural values. For example, repeated geometric forms may represent the endless nature of the divine, while plant inspired patterns can reflect ideas of paradise and the richness of nature. These geometric designs appear both inside and outside the buildings and often include shapes such as triangles, zigzag lines, and diamond forms. These are usually arranged in balanced and repeating compositions. Their presence shows the strong influence of Islamic visual culture, which values symmetry, order, and visual unity (Bello, 2017). Such patterns are commonly carved into mud surfaces or applied to woodwork elements (Fig. 7).

Colour also holds an important place in Hausa decorative traditions. The pigments are usually derived from natural sources such as local minerals and plant extracts. These colours are used to mark out architectural details and emphasize the beauty of each structure. Shades like red, white, yellow, and black are frequently chosen, each one holding a specific symbolic or cultural meaning within the community (Fig. 8) (Falola, 1999).



Figure 7: Geometric Patterns on Traditional Hausa Buildings.

Source: Rashid (2020).



Figure 8: Colour Used to Highlight Different Architectural Features.

Source: Jordi Zaragoza Angles.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized systematic review of relevant literature to examine the cultural symbols and architectural features of the Hausa. The investigation focused on elements such as the layout of settlements and family compounds, the

shape and structure of buildings, the materials used in construction, and the traditional methods applied during building. Information was obtained from a range of scholarly writings, including academic books, journal articles, historical texts, and archival materials that offer both background knowledge and theoretical perspectives on indigenous architecture in Nigeria. To maintain reliability, only peer-reviewed publications were considered in the study.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings from a systematic review of relevant literature on the role of cultural identity and symbolism in shaping traditional Hausa building patterns. The review highlights how architectural features such as spatial layout, construction methods, decorative elements, and material choices reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and identity of the Hausa people. These findings emphasize the significance of symbolism in the development of architectural forms and are illustrated in the accompanying table.

Table 1: Cultural Identity and Symbolic Features in Traditional Hausa Building Pattern

Cultural Identity Feature	Symbolic Meaning or Representation	Architectural Feature Influence
Religious Orientation (Islamic Faith)	Unity of God, spiritual direction, infinite perfection (via geometric abstraction)	Qibla-oriented prayer spaces, incorporation of mihrab, arabesque motifs, and symmetrical floor plans
Social Stratification and Prestige	Ornamentation as a reflection of wealth, authority, and status	Highly decorated façades, expanded courtyards, elaborate entrances (Zaure), elevated rooflines
Gender Roles and Privacy Norms	Spatial segregation reflects moral and social order	Segregated spaces like <i>Shigifa</i> , <i>Zaure</i> , and <i>Cikin Gida</i> ; inward-facing courtyard layouts
Family and Kinship Systems	Unity and continuity of lineage are represented through spatial proximity	Clustered housing units for extended families, radial courtyard organization
Indigenous Artistic Heritage	Ornamentation conveys identity, memory, and continuity	Graffito technique, molded relief patterns, and mural inscriptions on internal and external walls

Communal Culture and Hospitality	Openness and collective identity are represented through shared spaces	Central courtyards for communal activities, wide entrance halls (Zaure)
Cultural Festivals and Rituals	Decorative preparation of spaces symbolizes celebration and social cohesion	Expanded Zaure areas and festive motif applications for naming, marriage, and religious ceremonies
Local Environmental Wisdom	Functional forms express harmony with nature and adaptation to climate	Thick mud walls for thermal comfort, flat roofs, small window openings, and ventilation courtyards
Material Culture and Indigenous Technology	Earth materials symbolize sustainability, tradition, and local craftsmanship	Use of <i>Tubali</i> (mud bricks), <i>Azara</i> beams, domes (Tulluwa), and natural lime or earth plasters
Color Symbolism	Red for vitality, white for purity, black for protection, yellow for wealth and divinity	Application of local pigments in wall paintings, motifs, and interior spaces
Islamic Education and Literacy Culture	Niche spaces and inscriptions symbolize knowledge and divine enlightenment	Qur'anic study rooms, wall niches for texts, and symbolic inscriptions in Arabic calligraphy

Source: Developed by Author (2025)

4. Summary of Key Findings

The Hausa traditional building pattern is deeply shaped by cultural identity and symbolism. A notable feature is the defined entrance space, such as the *Zaure*, which serves as both a reception area and a symbolic marker of transition from public to private life. This reflects cultural values of hospitality, privacy, and social structure.

The layout of Hausa compounds emphasizes communal living, with buildings arranged around central courtyards. These spaces are multifunctional, supporting religious, domestic, and social activities, while also facilitating natural ventilation and lighting. Their inward-facing design reinforces the cultural emphasis on privacy and family unity, especially in line with Islamic teachings on gendered space use.

Spatial divisions within the compound reveal a deliberate organization that mirrors cultural roles

and social norms. Areas are clearly separated for men and women, guests and family, reflecting values of modesty, order, and respect. Openings such as windows are kept minimal and strategically placed to maintain comfort and privacy.

Material choices further express Hausa cultural values. Locally available earth, wood, and plant materials are used not only for their practicality but for their symbolic connection to the land and heritage. The walls and surfaces of buildings are decorated with motifs that carry spiritual and cultural meaning. Geometric patterns, inspired by Islamic art, signify unity, harmony, and divine perfection.

Security and enclosure are also key elements in Hausa settlements. High walls and limited entry points provide protection while symbolizing the importance of boundaries and sanctity. These features support both physical safety and cultural ideals around privacy and family cohesion.

Decoration plays a significant symbolic role in Hausa traditional building pattern. Carved motifs, mud reliefs, and colored plasters serve not just aesthetic purposes but also convey messages about spirituality, lineage, and status. Through these symbols, architecture becomes a form of cultural storytelling and identity preservation.

Overall, the evolution of Hausa traditional building pattern reveals a continuous link between form, function, and meaning. Every architectural decision, from layout to ornamentation, reflects a broader cultural logic rooted in religion, social order, and indigenous knowledge, making it a living symbol of Hausa identity.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that the Hausa traditional building pattern is a profound expression of cultural identity and symbolic meaning. Architectural features such as the *zaure* (entrance vestibule), internal courtyards, wall motifs, and spatial layouts reflect the Hausa people's social structures, religious beliefs, and environmental responses. These elements are not merely functional but carry layered meanings rooted in Islamic values, gender norms, and community life. Symbolism is embodied in geometric, floral, and calligraphic patterns, which serve not only decorative purposes but also communicate spiritual concepts and social status. The evolution of Hausa building patterns from circular to rectilinear forms reflects both adaptation to changing technologies and a continued desire to preserve traditional values. Moreover, this research stresses the resilience and cultural relevance of indigenous architecture in responding to the environmental conditions of Northern Nigeria. The use of local materials, passive design strategies, and spatial arrangements grounded in cultural logic reveal a sophisticated understanding of climate, sustainability, and social harmony. Overall, the Hausa traditional building pattern is not static, but a living tradition that adapts while maintaining its identity. The study contributes to architectural scholarship by highlighting how cultural identity and symbolism play vital roles in shaping built forms and offers a critical perspective for rethinking contemporary architectural practices in culturally rich contexts.

Modern architects and town planners should integrate Hausa cultural elements and symbolic forms into contemporary designs to preserve heritage and foster identity. Governments and institutions should protect and promote traditional architecture through supportive policies and conservation programs. Architectural education should emphasize indigenous knowledge, ensuring future professionals understand local design logic. Community participation in design processes is crucial, and efforts should be made to document and digitize traditional Hausa building practices to safeguard them for future generations.

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