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## EXPLORING THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION OF HAUSA AJAMI CALLIGRAPHY AND INDIGENOUS NORTHERN ZAYYANA DESIGNS FOR WALL HANGING

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### ABSTRACT

The study delves into the fascinating world of Hausa Ajami calligraphy and the indigenous Northern Zayyana designs used for wall hanging, shedding light on their cultural significance and artistic expression. The Hausa are known for unique Ajami calligraphy and traditional wall decorations (Zayyana) which have been acknowledged across Africa and the world at large, these traditional art forms are been faced with the thread of extinction. Therefore, the study examines the historical context, techniques, and the role of these art forms in the Hausa society, it also highlights the cultural foundations and unique craftsmanship that shape these artistic creations. Furthermore, the study adopts qualitative method using ethnographic approach by a design analysis component that systematically study the visual aspects, techniques, and symbolism embedded in Hausa ajami calligraphy and wall hanging design. The focus group discussion and visual analysis examine the visual elements, including colors, patterns, motifs, and materials used in creating Hausa ajami calligraphy and indigenous zayyana designs. The symbolic interpretation investigates the cultural, religious, and social symbolism expressed through the calligraphy and designs, exploring the artistic and significance. The study contributes to the documentation, preservation, and promotion of these unique cultural expressions, fostering a deeper appreciation for their artistic and cultural value.

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**Keywords:** *Hausa Ajami Calligraphy, Zayyana Designs, Cultural Significance, Preservation and Symbolism*

### INTRODUCTION

Most of the Northern Nigerian region was brought together in a single Islamic government at the creation of Sokoto Caliphate in the Jihad (Holy war) of 1804H-1808. "The complexity of Nigeria today continues to be

determined by Influences originating in the 19th century jihad which was led by Sheikh Usman Dan Fodio" (Angel, 2007). Among the norms and culture of the Hausa that were being influenced by Islamic religion are in the calligraphic writing of Hausa, the art of wall decoration using geometrical shapes, the craft development, architecture, textile, and garment of the people just to mention a few examples. Therefore, Hausa ajami calligraphy and indigenous Northern Nigerian designs represent a vibrant and significant aspect of the rich cultural heritage of the Hausa in Northern Nigeria. The art forms of ajami calligraphy and wall hanging design have evolved over the centuries, showcasing the region's distinct artistic traditions, religious expressions, and social values. Historically, one of the most important developments that has arisen out of Arabic literacy in West Africa is the establishment of a tradition of writing African languages in the Arabic script, a practice known as ajami (Laughlin, 2017). The word ajami is a classical Arabic word for non-Arab, and which generally refers to the writing format of a language in the Arabic script. Thus, Hausa ajami calligraphy is a unique form of writing that involves the use of Arabic script to represent the Hausa language. Ajami calligraphy was developed during the Islamic influence on the Northern Nigerian region, it becomes an integral part of Hausa cultural identity, representing their devotion to Islam, and serving as a means of communication, expression, and artistic creativity. Lines, shapes, geometric and non-geometric are the basic element of design which cannot be ruled out in the Northern Nigeria design, due to the influence of Islamic religion (Kashim, Olugunwa and Ogunlade, 2014). The intricate strokes, curves, and embellishments in ajami calligraphy convey not only the aesthetic beauty but also the deep religious and cultural meanings embedded within the Hausa culture.

Indigenous Northern Nigerian artists and craftsmen have shown remarkable creativity and skill, producing captivating artworks that adorn homes, public spaces, and cultural centers. These designs often depict the vibrant colors, patterns, and motifs that reflect the region's cultural diversity. Wall hangings serve as an important medium for storytelling, preserving oral traditions, and celebrating the unique cultural heritage of the Hausa.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT/ JUSTIFICATION**

Despite their significance and cultural value, both Hausa ajami calligraphy and indigenous Northern Zayyana designs face challenges related to documentation, preservation, and appreciation. Isa and Dalibi (2017), in Shonum (2021) noted that, "in most of the cities in Northern Nigeria, these

earthly buildings or wall decorations which are sometimes called facade or vernacular architecture are considered as relics for they are being replaced by modern structures and as a result of these, they are fading and varnishing into out of existence” With the steady modernization and globalization, these traditional art forms have experienced a decline in popularity and risk being overshadowed by more prevalent and mainstream art practices. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the importance of preserving, documenting, and promoting the rich artistic traditions of Hausa ajami calligraphy and indigenous Northern Nigerian designs. By conducting in-depth research and analysis, we can contribute to the understanding and preservation of these unique cultural expressions, ensuring that future generations continue to appreciate and value the beauty and heritage encapsulated within Hausa ajami calligraphy and indigenous Northern Nigerian designs.

**The objectives of the study are:**

1. To identify the historical and cultural significance of Hausa ajami calligraphy and indigenous Northern Nigerian designs.
2. To analyze the techniques, materials, and tools used in these art forms.
3. To explore both the calligraphy techniques, Hausa motifs and patterns to produce wall hangings

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research adopts the qualitative research methods which enable the researchers to gain a deep understanding of the cultural, historical, and religious aspects of Hausa ajami calligraphy and wall hanging design respectively. The researcher also employs Ethnographic research technique. Ethnographic approach was used by Sobers (2019) in a cultural study of a people including their arts. This approach aid the researcher towards investigating and examining the beliefs, cultural identity, philosophies, and functionality concerning the Hausa ajami calligraphy and the indigenous Northern Nigerian designs. The study was examined and studied at various locations of using focus group discussions, observations and visual images:

- A. **Kano:** Institute of Islamic Calligraphy and Geometric Designs Gabari,
- B. **Jigawa:** Dutse Emirate and Dutse central Mosque,
- C. **Kaduna:** Zaria Palace

The study conducted a focus group interviews in each of the study area. The focus group study applied a purposive sampling strategy to obtain possible accurate data that will reveal the characteristics of the entire study

area because the participants have knowledge on ajami calligraphy and zayyana. However, this strategy was supplemented by a more randomized approach where participants were chosen within institutions, Islamic schools and wall designers with a verbal invitation. Below is the population of the participants:

STATES	CODING	CALLIGRAPHERS	WALL DESIGNERS	SCHOLARS	TOTAL
Kano	KN	4	2	0	6
Zaria	ZR	3	1	2	6
Jigawa	JG	0	5	1	6

### Data Collection/ Analysis

The data collection focus on the following:

- Conducting Interviews with the calligraphers, scholars and wall designers using focus group discussion
- Collecting of the Hausa calligraphic works and zayyana motifs and designs from traditional walls through Photographs.
- Selection of Hausa calligraphy and Hausa zayyana motifs for reproduction process. The reproduction of the wall hanging was experimented at Fine and Applied Arts Department of Federal College of Education Yola. Pictures/images and observation schedules was utilized accordingly.

### Presentation of Results

**Objective 1:** To identify the historical and cultural significance of Hausa Ajami calligraphy and Indigenous Northern Nigerian designs.

#### Origin

The origin of Hausa calligraphy, based on focus group discussion (FGD) has different opinions. The KN Participants all agreed that it originates from Kano. In contrast, ZR participants decided that the first birthplace for Hausa Ajami calligraphy is Yan Doto in Tsafe (Chafe) presently in Zamfara state. Their reasons are as follows:

**KN Participants:** Hausa ajami writing originates from Kano through Arab scholars and traders during Muhammadu Rumfa the then emir of Kano. The Arabs came to Kano to preach and trade respectively. Shehu Almughili was one of the proponent contributors to the spreading of Islam, Islamic Shariah, and Ajami writings in Kano. The Kanawa traders learn the

Ajami to keep a record of their business transactions. Sheikh Nasiru Kabara, sheik Atiku Sanka, and Malam Sharu Gabari were renowned Kano-based Hausa Ajami calligraphers and produced works of poems in Ajami calligraphy.

**ZR Participants:** Yandoto is one of the oldest Hausa traditional Islamic institutes that existed even before the establishment of the Kano emirate and the jihad of bin Fodio. The Islamic center is a school where famous scholars from all Northern parts of Nigeria (Zaria, kano, katsina, gobir, etc) and some parts of West African countries (Niger, Mali, Senegal, etc) used to attend during the dry season. After the season they normally go back to their places and disseminate what they learn to their students. Through these processes, the Hausa Ajami calligraphy was spread throughout Northern Nigeria.

#### **Indigenous Northern Nigerian Designs.**

The indigenous northern Nigerian designs/decorations are referred to as zayyana. Zayyana includes geometric patterns and motifs that are deeply rooted in the cultural and artistic traditions of the Hausa, also a means of communication. All the FGD participants of the three study areas agreed with the above statements but had different views on the Zayyana designs.

**JG participants:** Almost all the participants in this category are wall decorators. They all connect zayyana designs to emirates and palaces within the Hausa communities. Most of the design motifs used by the calligraphers in calligraphy writings; izu, summuni, mufisi, aya, kumsa, and kuri are designs that are adopted from the palace murals.

**ZR participants:** zayyana are designs of various motifs that serve as an outline decoration of the Qur'anic verse, which is usually executed on wooden slates during one's Qur'anic graduation.

#### **Significance of Hausa Ajami Calligraphy and Zayyana Designs.**

All the FGD participants of the three study areas mention the following as significant factors;

- in the past, Hausa ajami writing has been used as a form of communication from one emirate to another where symbols represent stamps.

- As a form of keeping records- Sales agreements, contract agreements, divorce letters, legal verdicts, etc.
- In recent times, the zayyana designs are not only restricted to Islamic writing, it has extended to various surfaces i.e. Cloths, Calabashes, Architectural structures, and so on.

**Objective 2: To analyze the techniques, materials, and tools used in these art forms.**

### **Techniques of Hausa Ajami Calligraphy**

All the FGD participants of the three study areas agreed that Hausa Ajami calligraphy is in warshu which is a maghrib style of writing. Some participants in ZR mention other styles ie. Jangora, Jirge and kafe all are sudan-maghrib styles. While a participant in KN noted that, there is a difference between warshu and hafsu forms of calligraphy, Abu Sa'id Al-Qutbi was the inventor of warsh an Naafi recitation of Qur'an which gave birth to Warsh writings. Al- Qutbi is from Africa which is why the writing of the Qur'an in the region of Africa is regarded as Warsh.

### **Materials and tools of Hausa Ajami Calligraphy and Zayyana Designs**

All the FGD participants of the three study areas used almost the same materials and tools for Hausa Ajami calligraphy and Zayyana Designs. The materials are ink (tawada), pen (alkalami), sandpaper, blade, paper, leather, slates, etc.

#### **Ink (Tawada)**

The formulation of ink (Tawada) in the form of black colour is of three categories:

- **Tawadar bayan tukunya-** which is obtained from the outer layer of the cooking pot when heated on firewood.
- **Tawadar Dawa-** which is gotten from millet
- **Tawadar dinya-** which is gotten from blackberry.

All these inks mentioned above cannot be used without additional ingredients such as Karo, Zige, bagaruwa, etc. These components help in sticking the ink onto a surface and also make the writing gloss. Apart from black colour the calligraphers use other locally made colours eg. Red, blue, green, and yellow. These colour agents (Galura or Tiri) are in powdered form and are obtained from Yan Koli. The calligraphers mixed the colours.

Thus, the vowels (wasali), and bookmarks (kuri, sumuni, izu, mufisi, aya, kumsa) are represented by the coloured inks.

### **Calligraphy Pen (Alkalami)**

Before the invention of alkalami one of the ZR participants stated that “(gashin Kaza) hen feathers were used as a pen”. However, all the FGD Participants opined that Gamba is a dry cornstalk obtained from the millet plant, it serves as a medium of writing by the calligraphers. One of the ZR participants mentioned that the calligraphy pen (alkalami) is sharpened with a blade to have a semi-pointed edge. The calligraphy pens as a major tool for designs and writing are of different sizes and shapes, each one performs a certain function. Similarly, one of the KN participants opined that a “calligraphy pen with a flat head produces (Zube) thicker writing while one with a pointed head, produces (Jibge) thinner writing”. However, due to the advancement of modernization and technology, the calligraphers adopted the science of geometric designs and switched to using colored markers, compasses, rulers, and other mechanical aids in writing and designing.

### **Medium of Writing**

Calligraphy according to one of the KN participants stated that “the writing craft started during the caliphate precisely during the Calipher Omar bin Khat-tab period where quran hadith and some other important documents were compiled. These documents and scriptures were written down on bones, stones, slates, and animal skins.” Thus, with modern inventions and modifications, papers were introduced as a medium of communication. However, wall surfaces, fabrics, calabashes, and any outer surface of an object can be inscribed with calligraphy and Zayyana designs.

### **Objective 3: To explore both the calligraphy techniques, zayyana motifs, and patterns to produce wall hangings.**

This design experiment was carried out directly through manual calligraphy writing and zayyana Designs. The designs were generated out of the researcher’s innovation and creativity. Different stages were employed in the design process for the wall hangings. The main process which runs through all the designs can be epitomized as follows.

- Making layouts through sketching using mechanical aids
- Colouring designs
- Design the writing using Hausa Ajami calligraphy



The Hausa Ajami calligraphy for wall hanging was produced as samples. The first design was made from a simulation of Qur'anic verses of Fatiha, Iklas, ayatul-Qursi, Falak, and Nas. These verses are sacred, and devotional and aim to protect those who read them. Simple geometric shapes (circles, triangles, and squares) were used for the Zayyana design compositions. Complementary colours of Red, green, blue, and orange were applied to the spaces of the geometric shapes.



*Plate 1: The Sacred Calligraphy Design by the Researcher (2024)*

The second design was made from secular speeches from social media via (Facebook). The researchers use their Facebook accounts to sort the most trending video content in Hausa. The researchers transcribed the video into written scripts and designed those trending speeches into Ajami calligraphy designs and infusing the Hausa zayyana.

*a. Jira, Jara, Jira  
A Nigeria kake ban son hauka  
nonsense*

*wait, wait, wait  
you are in Nigeria I hate*





*Plate 2: Jira-Jira- Jira Design by Mustapha (2024)*

This is a speech made by Dan Bello (Bello Mustapha Galadanchi) mostly in all his video contents. He is a social media influencer, who has a unique way of communicating with his page followers. His content exposed the corruption of government officials mostly in the northern region of Nigeria. The designs were a combination of Ajami calligraphy and zayyana designs on embossed cards

*b. Abar mai kayyansa*

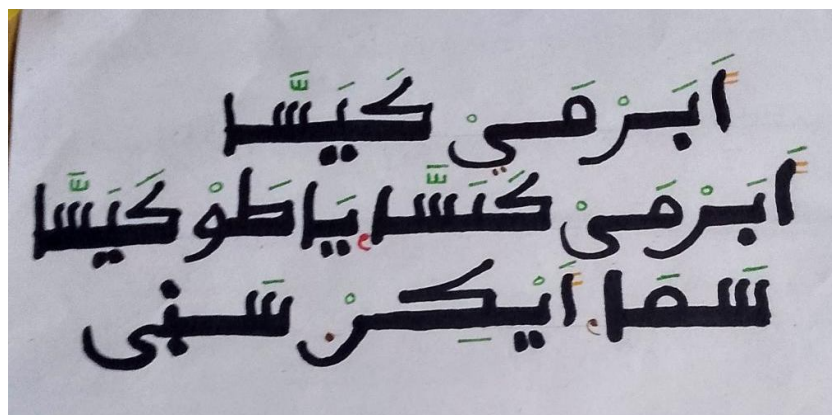
*Abar mai kayansa ya dauka sama*

*Aikinsa ne*

*leave it for him*

*leave it for him, let him lift it up*

*it is his work*

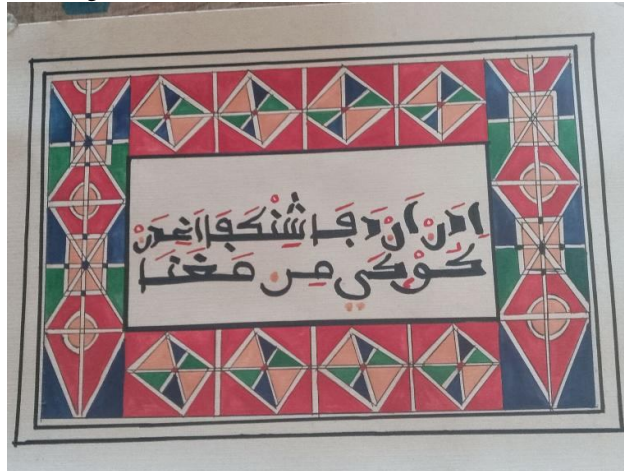


*Plate 3: Abar mai Kayansa Designed by Mustapha (2024)*

This is another speech from trending content that people use for individuals when exposed to corruption. The picture of the person would be displayed then the audio background would play the above speech.

*c. Idan an dafa shinkafa a gidankutell me, if they cook rice at your House*

*Kai mun magana*



*Plate 4: Idan an dafa Shinkafa designed by Mustapha (2024)*

This is a write-up usually written by individuals on their Facebook walls to test whether people can read the message. Thus, these types of messages are mainly to educate the Hausa Facebook users on Ajami writing. Geometric shapes were used as the design composition. Red, yellow, orange, Green, and Blue were the colours used for the design.

*d. Tsiwa tsakanin tsitaka, tsatstsewala tsiyane, tsakuri bisa tsinin dan ya tsa*



*Plate 5: Tsiwa designed by Almustapha (2024)*

Tsiwa is another write-up that trends on the Facebook pages of individuals. It aims to test the abilities of friends on how deep they are in Hausa Ajami's writing. In this design, the zayyana (border lines) was floral not the usual geometric or abstract lines. This is to show that the zayyana design is not limited to Geometric designs.

### Major Findings

- Abu Sa'id Al-Qutbi was the inventor of Warsh an Naafi recitation of the Qur'an which gave birth to Warsh's writing style.
- Modern inventions and modifications, wall surfaces, fabrics, calabashes, and the outer surface of an object can be inscribed with calligraphy and Zayyana designs.
- Calligraphers adopted the science of geometric designs and switched to using coloured makers, compasses, rulers, and other mechanical aids in writings and designing.

### CONCLUSION

Hausa Ajami calligraphy and zayyana designs are more than just decorative arts, they are means of expression of the Hausa identity, Islamic belief, and West African cultural heritage. Their application in wall hangings serves for beauty and spiritual practice, preserving centuries of tradition while adopting modern forms of artistic expression. As these arts continue to evolve in response to contemporary cultural exchanges, their significance remains rooted in their ability to convey complex messages of faith, history, and social values. By understanding and appreciating the deeper meanings embedded in these visual traditions, we can ensure their continued relevance and respect in both local and global contexts.

### RECOMMENDATION

- Encourage contemporary calligraphers, artists, and designers to integrate Hausa Ajami calligraphy and Zayyana motifs into modern art and interior design.
- Advocate for the documentation and teaching of Hausa Ajami calligraphy and Zayyana techniques to younger generations to ensure the survival of these art forms.
- It is recommended that Hausa Ajami Calligraphy and Zayyana techniques as well as Uli decorations and Onaism should be included

in the arts curriculum, depending on the region where the students reside

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