

Appraising Selected Gbagyi And Dukawa Traditional Cloth Motifs

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Abstract: Motifs are complementary design units of an artistic pieces, apparent in the Visual arts. In textile, it reflects cultural tradition of artistic identity, diversity and heritage. This study examines the motif traditions in clothing of the Kuta (Gbagyi) and Rafi (Dukawa) people of Niger state Nigeria. It is aimed at appraising their motifs through identification, examination and comparison. A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Data were collected through direct field investigative methodology of interviews, observation, sketch illustration and photographic documentation. Finding reveal that both ethnic groups employ rectilinear and curvilinear motifs (lines: thin, thick, broken, straight and diagonal; shapes: triangle, diamond, and parallelogram), used structurally and symbolically. It further revealed the similarities and dissimilarities in motif expressions of each group. These differences reflect environmental influence, cultural beliefs, and historical development within the two ethnic community. The study concludes that the motifs of the Gbagyi and Dukawa people are both unique and interconnected, expressing cultural identity while maintaining distinct visual characteristics. It consequently recommended the need for preservation and promotion of indigenous cloth motifs by practitioners, scholars and governments.

Keywords: Motifs, Gbagyi, Dukawa, Niger State, Cultural heritage, Traditional cloths.

Introduction

Traditional clothing in Nigeria serves not only as functional attire but also as an important expression of cultural identity, history, and artistic heritage [1]. There are different methods through which fabrics can be decorated, including collage, appliqué, patchwork, quilting, embroidery, tapestry, dyeing, and painting [2, 3, 4, 5]. These decorative processes are often executed using motifs, which are single units of a design [6, 7, 8]. Motifs are simply recurring design elements that reinforce the main theme of a composition [9, 10]. When motifs are combined and repeated in specific arrangements, they form patterns [11]. Historically, motifs served as a means of communication long before the development of writing systems [8, 12, 13]. Images and symbols were used to tell stories and convey messages, a concept closely related to their use in textile design [14, 15, 16, 17, 18].

Motif structures in traditional clothing are not randomly created; rather, they are guided by established design principles [19, 20]. These principles contribute to the visual organization and overall aesthetic appeal of the fabric [19, 20]. The motifs found on traditional clothes across Nigeria are deeply rooted in the cultural beliefs and traditions of various ethnic groups [21, 22, 23]. These tradition is also rooted in the Gbagyi and Dukawa people of Niger State, located in the North-Central region of Nigeria, home to diverse ethnic groups with rich cultural backgrounds [24, 25, 26]. The State shares boundaries with Kaduna State and the Federal Capital Territory to the east, Kebbi and Zamfara States to the north, Kogi and Kwara States to the south, and an international border with the Republic of Benin to the west [26]. Her capital is Minna, and it comprises twenty-five local government areas; where the Gbagyi and Dukawa ethnic groups motifs of Niger State [1, 2, 23, 26, 28].

The Gbagyi people, also known as Gwari, are one of the indigenous ethnic groups in Niger State. They are known for their peaceful nature and calm disposition, often described by the phrase “do it the Gwari way.” The Gbagyi are predominantly farmers and skilled artisans, engaging in crafts such as pottery, blacksmiths, and weaving [25]. The Gbagyi have two distinctive traditional fabrics that reflect their cultural values and heritage, notably the dark blue fabrics and black fabrics [21]. The Dukawa people on the other hand are found in the Yauri division of the old Sokoto Province and the Kontagora region of Niger State. They share cultural similarities with the Kambari people, including aspects of language, beliefs, and dress. Traditionally, the Dukawa did not wear woven clothing; instead, they used leaves tied around their waists, symbolizing their close connection to nature and locally available materials.

However, with contact during the colonial period, clothing was introduced and gradually adopted. Over time, the Dukawa embraced mainstream northern Nigerian attire, such as kaftans and wrappers [26]. They display an evidence of unique and diverse clothing motif traditions [21, 22, 23, 27]. Despite the cultural significance of these traditional motifs, they have not received adequate scholarly recognition in terms of documentation. Few of the previous studies, only examined traditional motifs of some ethnic groups in northern Nigeria. Among them are works of Joy [22], Alau [1], and Gausa and Abubakar [23], with studies on the Ham, Southern Kaduna communities, and the Jukun groups. These studies are largely on individual groups, providing general descriptions of their textile practices without systematically examining the visual cum structural relationships.

Other relevant literature materials includes Eyinade, Mohamed and Olaniyi [7], studied motif embroidery art in Nigeria. The research centered on southwest motifs textile, embroidery motif produced by male and female artist. The study reviewed several forms of embroidery motifs applied to fabrics. Olowokerere [14] researched on the patterns and motifs of Itokun textile. Itokun is the location of tie and dye makers in Abeokuta. He highlighted the motifs used in making their fabrics and how the patterns are derived. Zaity [17] write on the impact of motifs and patterns of surface design in fashion and textile design on people’s emotion. The study focus on different aspect of art (animations, graphics and fashion) as it relates to people’s emotion with the use of textile motifs.

Mohammed and Salawu [6] attests formation of motif on textile wall hanging in contemporary Nigeria. The research was carried out in Southwestern Nigeria. the study opined that motifs are the formation of ideas and philosophical thoughts. Mohammed submitted that eight different motifs were pronounced among the wall hanging textile in southwestern Nigeria: Naturalism, Geometric, Traditional, Abstract, Floral, Zoomorphic, Dots and Bulleyes. Similar Mohammed and Adeoti [29] further opined that, the motifs on the Adire and Ankara were usually re-represented on Fila among the Yoruba of Southwest, Nigeria. These motifs were pronounced with beads and velvet for fashion, attesting furtherance of motifs on cap production among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria. Akinde, Woods and Odeniyi [30], Akinde, Tijani, Akintonde and Eyinade [231], and Akinde [32] worked on Fila and Gele of the Yoruba, reiterated their significance in contemporary times and the place of motif on fabrics.

From the above studies, there is apparent dearth of documentation on Dukawa and Gbagyi traditional cloth motif of Niger state, Nigeria. As such, this study focused its appraisal on motifs of the Gbagyi (Gwari) and Dukawa traditional cloths, examining their similarities and differences.

Methodology

This study adopts direct field investigation methodology, using a qualitative research approach of interviews, observation, sketching, and photographic documentation. Data was collected from artisans, villagers, and textile practitioners in Kuta (Gbagyi) and Rafi (Dukawa). Fifteen (15) Gbagyi traditional cloths were identified, revealing twenty three (23) motifs. Nineteen (19) motifs were identified from ten (10) Dukawa traditional clothes, courtesy of the displacement and insecurity of the area [33]. Consequently, seven (7) motifs from Gbagyi tribe and seven (7) motifs from Dukawa tribes were purposely selected for appraisal (table, 1).

Table 1: Distribution of identified cloths and appraised motifs from the Gbagyi and Dukawa tribes

Local Government	Tribe	No. of Identified Traditional Cloths	No. of Identified Motifs	No. of Purposely Appraised Motifs	Shortlisted of Motifs
Kuta	Gbagyi	15	23	7	Ajesuda, Goja, Kuchi, Kpara, Kukwo, Ruwa and Etse Gate
Rafi	Dukawa	10	19	7	Rafi, Sokoto, Tudu, Maji, Dundun, Gurbi, and Dakali
Total	2	25	42	14	14

The above table 2 is a true reflection of the identified cloths, photographed/sketched motifs and the numbers shortlisted for appraisal.

Discussion

The total identified motifs of these two ethnic groups (Gbagyi and Dukawa) were forty two (42) in all. However, only fourteen were purposely appraised as follows (plates 1-14). The dark blue fabric, known as “*Ajesuda*” is produced from locally sourced cotton that is spun, woven, and dyed using traditional tie-and-dye techniques (plate 1). The dominant dark blue colour is regarded as authentic and symbolizes purity, protection, and unity. The black fabric represents a more contemporary traditional attire of the Gbagyi people. It is dyed completely black and often features illustrative designs and inscriptions. A common motif depicts Gbagyi women carrying loads on their shoulders rather than on their heads, reflecting the cultural belief that the head is sacred. These illustrations are typically rendered in white, creating a strong visual contrast.



Plate 1

Ajesuda, Photographed by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Goja (line stripe) motif is composed of repeated horizontal lines which is arranged in parallel order (plate 2). The motif emphasizes simplicity and rhythm through the use of elongated rectangular stripes which varies in the thickness. Line is the most prominent visual element in this motif which is repeated to create visual harmony and continuity. In plate 3 there is equal spacing between the forms which introduces balance and order within the composition. In plate 5, the variation between the width of lines prevents monotony and adds subtle movement to the appearance of the motif. This in turn makes it suitable for textile application and common to all the traditional cloth of the Gbagyi people because of its simplicity. Despite its minimal structure, the arrangement achieves rhythm through repetition and proportional spacing. It signifies order, unity, collective goal.

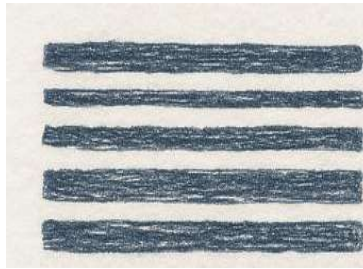


Plate 2

Goja motif, Sketch by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Kuchi (diamond) motif shows a series of chevrons/V shaped geometric motif pointing to the right (plate 3). The major element is line and triangular shape which is found in the lower part of the V shaped. The motif shows a strong directional movement which gives it depth and rhythm. The chevron form is often associated with protection and wading off evil. In plate 6, the motif is composed of geometric arrangement of angular and rectangular forms. The motif combines diagonal and horizontal lines with interconnected lines overlapping each other in a rectangular form which gives the design depth and visual complexity. There is also an appearance of triangular shape at the edge of the rectangular shape which gives the motif balance symmetrically. Lines and shapes are the dominant visual element in the motif which creates emphasis and clarity. The repeated angular arrangement introduces dynamism and prevents the composition from appearing static. This motif is also prominent in the traditional attire of the Gbagyi people which reflects order, stability and organization making it visual suitable for textile decoration.

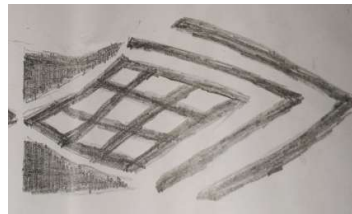


Plate 3

Kuchi motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Kpara (triangle) motif is composed of repeated triangular shaped which is arranged in an orderly pattern (plate 4). The triangles are positioned in two horizontal rows creating a balanced and rhythmic composition. The dominant visual element is shape. The shape used is triangle which appear with its pointed edges and angular structure which denotes its sense of direction, movement and strength. Balance is achieved through the symmetrical spacing and proportional arrangement of the triangular forms which is achieved through equal distribution of the shape across the composition. This gives the motif stability and order. This motif is used sparingly in the traditional attire of the Gbagyi people.

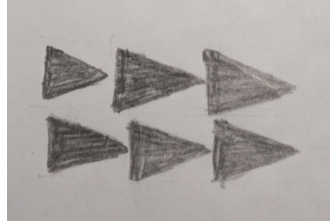


Plate 4

Kpara motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Kukwo (checkerboard) motif is characterised by a rectangular diamond/kite like shape with overlapping diagonal lines (plate 5). The overlapped lines forms small squares within the rectangular shape. This gives the motif depth and solidity. Rhythm is created through the repetition of the diagonal lines which gives it fluidity and simplicity. This motif is further characterized by an elongated geometric form that looks like an arrow structure. It consists of parallel lines that converge into pointed ends which denotes movement and direction within the composition. The angular lines are repeated to emphasize continuity and flow. Line is the dominant visual element in the motif. The elongated horizontal lines guide the viewers eyes smoothly across the composition while the pointed edge creates emphasis and directional focus. For plate 8 and 9, balance is achieved through the symmetrical arrangement of the upper and lower forms around the central axis.

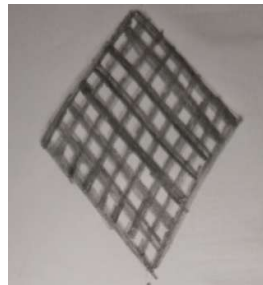


Plate 5

Kukwo motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Ruwa (circle) motif is characterized by a square solid shape with extension at the four edges (plate 6). The extension at the edges gives the motif dynamism and boredom. Shape is the dominant visual element in the motif. The square shape is fully presented in the motif all over the space which gives it symmetrical balance. The motif is composed of diamond shape with smaller inverted square in between the shape. The diamond shape is repeated severally which gives the motif rhythm, balance and fluidity. The repetition pattern is all over repeat pattern. The space is well utilised with the introduction of smaller diamond in the space between each diamond shape. Ruwa motif signifies unity



Plate 6

Ruwa motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Etsu gate motif is characterised by lines, horizontal and vertical lines placed in a rigid 90 degrees angles which gives it a sense of order and stability (plate 7). It is a geometric key pattern that is made of continuous interlocking rectangles which forms a maze like pattern. The maze like pattern of repeated form which gives it visual rhythm and flow across the frame of the rectangle shape. The Etsu refers to the traditional ruler and chieftain title among the Gbagyi people, therefore this motif is associated with royalty, authority and leadership. There is a flow of lines which are unbroken in both plate. This denotes the unbroken lineage of a ruling house. Balance is achieved with bold lines used symmetrically across the motif. It signifies leadership and unity.

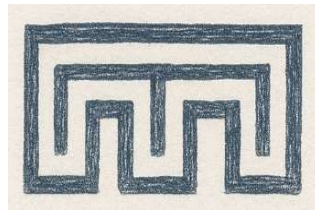


Plate 7

Etsu gate, Photographed by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Rafi stripe (river path line) motif is composed of horizontal linear elements arranged in parallel formation across the composition (plate 8). The design combines continuous stripes with a sequence of short rectangular lines placed in the centre which creates variation within the linear arrangement. Line is the most dominant visual element in the composition. The parallel lines are repeated so as to guide the viewers eyes smoothly from one end of the motif to another which creates rhythm and movement within the design. Balance is achieved through symmetrical distribution of the linear forms while repetition strengthens harmony and rhythm within the composition. The broken vertical line in the centre is inspired by river rooted near Dukawa settlement

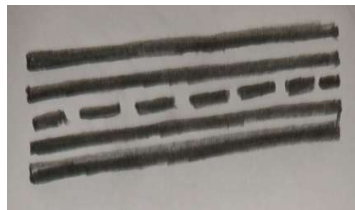


Plate 8

Rafi motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Sokoto motif is composed of interconnected angular lines arranged in a step like or zigzag formation (plate 9). The repeated geometric structure create a rhythmic flow across the composition giving the motif a dynamic and organized appearance. The motif emphasizes movement through the alternating upward and downward directional turns of the lines. The geometric arrangement of the lines generates a sense of progression and directional movement across the motif. Balance is achieved through the equal distribution of the zigzag forms across the composition. The repetition of similar shapes creates harmony and unity while the alternating direction prevent monotony and add visual interest.

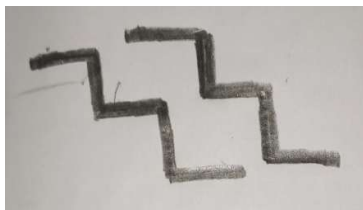


Plate 9

Sokoto motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Tudu (peaks) motifs are hill shaped triangles which symbolizes the hilly terrain of their location and settlement (plate 10). Shape is the dominant visual element in the composition. The motif is composed of repeated triangular geometric forms arranged vertically in two parallel columns. The orderly placement of the shapes create a balanced and organized composition. Rhythm and continuity is created with the use of repeated triangles. The triangular forms introduces sharp angularity and directional movement creating a sense of strength and stability. Balance is achieved through the symmetrical arrangement of the triangle on both sides of the composition. The equal spacing and proportional distributions of the forms create visual stability and order

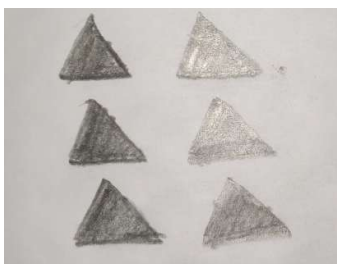


Plate 10

Tudu motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Maji (flow) motif are Lines and shape is dominated visual element in the composition (plate 11). The motif is composed of repeated zigzag, angular line with triangle shapes in between the spaces of the lines. It uses a sequence of upright and inverted triangular forms arranged rhythmically. The design creates a strong sense of movement and continuity. Balance is achieved through the repetition of the shapes within the composition. The sharp edges and pointed ends of the lines and shape give the motif an energetic and bold appearance.



Plate 11

Maji motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Dundun motif is visually dominated with shape, composed of semi circular shapes and an inverted semi circular shape with a central vertical form in between the two shapes (plate 12). The upper and lower halves mirror each other, emphasizing harmony, unity and order. The arrangement of the shape gives balance symmetrically to the motif which gives it visual stability. The central connecting shape acts as a focal point that ties the entire composition together. Dundun rhythm like drum beat spacing inspired by the rhythm of local drums.



Plate 12

Dundun motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Gurbi (Arrow) motif is composed of angular zig zag lines combined with arrow like projection which makes line the dominant visual element in this motif (plate 13). The repetition of the pointed forms create a fast visual rhythm. The upward and downward movement of lines gives the design dynamism, action and tension. The motif relies heavily on the quality of lines which symbolizes progress, direction, motion and alertness.

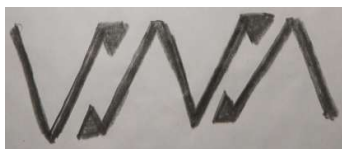


Plate 13

Gurbi motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

Dakali motif is built from rectangular and square geometric forms (plate 14). Shape is the dominant visual element for this composition. The repeated blocks of rectangle and square are arranged in a structure linear sequence. The motif appears stable and solid because of the dominance of the rectangular forms. Smaller square element between the larger shapes help to break monotony and add details to the composition. The motif demonstrate organization strength, uniformity and balance.



Plate 14

Dakali motif, Sketched by Bamigboye Oyenike, 2025

The similarities between Gbagyi and Dukawa motifs are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Similarities and dissimilarities between the appraised motifs of Gbagyi and Dukawa tribes.

Similarities	Gbagyi Tribe Motif	Dukawa Tribe Motif
lines	Goja (Five horizontal lines)	Rafi (Five horizontal lines with broken lines)
Shapes	Kpara (Six horizontal triangles)	Tudu peaks (Six vertical triangles)

The above table 2, showcased the two tribes similarity and dissimilarity motifs

Conclusion

The woven textiles of the northern Nigeria are unique and dynamic, significantly fabric or cloth motifs of the Gbagyi and Dukawa ethnic groups of Niger State. The study revealed adoption of rectilinear and curvilinear motifs (lines: thin, thick, broken, straight and diagonal; shapes: triangle, diamond, and parallelogram) by the two ethnic groups. These motifs are unique in structure and representation, reflecting cultural identity and artistic variation. The study concludes that the motifs are similar, though with dissimilarity. It consequently recommended the need for preservation and promotion of indigenous cloth motifs by practitioners, scholars and governments.

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