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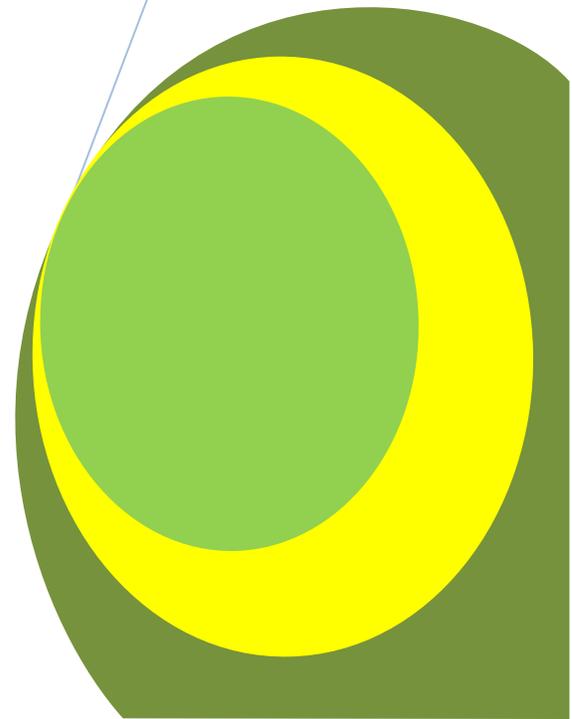
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## Linear Patterns and Motifs: AN Appraisal of Kambari Patterns and Motifs for Body Decoration

By

Aliyu Mohammed Bisalla



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# Linear Patterns and Motifs: AN Appraisal of Kambari Patterns and Motifs for Body Decoration

Aliyu Mohammed Bisalla

School of Environmental Studies, Department of Arts and Industrial Design, Federal Polytechnic Nasarawa, Nigeria.

Email: bisalla2003 @yaho o.com

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## Abstract

This paper attempted to examine the impact of line as the most fundamental element of design for visual communication purposes, different types of lines were also identified with their impressions or gestures, the paper went further to appraise Kambari body markings as patterns and motifs basically represented in lines for body decoration and communication of certain ideals, such as lineage, religion, imparting communal identity and some other distinct social messages in one way or the other. The paper further identify some Kambari body patterns and motifs commonly use for decorative purposes and their meanings.

**Keywords:** line, Body decoration, Patterns and motifs.

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## INTRODUCTION

The art of making decorative patterns on the skin is an ancient practice in Africa that is now gradually fading away. In some African cultures, where body marking is practiced, the type of marks on a person's face indicates a person's rank, clan or cult in the society. In some of these cultures, it is also used to improve a person's physical beauty, and each social group defined its own rules about body decoration. Typically, the marks were made as repeated patterns that covered most part of the body skin. Body decoration is seen as a way of communicating specific ideas and this tradition is still being advocated and practiced by several cultures and people. The dimension and scope of body markings dependent on the people, community or society, facial and body markings in most Nigerian cultures are either permanent or temporary. These markings, given to a child at a very tender age, validate the position of Eyo (1977) that in Africa, there is no such thing as art for art sake. The reason is that body markings (aside their other functions) serve as a mark for identifying a person's lineage.

According to Sani (1995) some young children and even to a large extent members of the royal family in Benin Kingdom are tattooed on the chest and wear facial marks, bearing vertical one inch marks made below the eye wall in sickly children in order to wade off constant sickness, which are later regarded as identification marks. Interestingly (Negri, 1979; Ajibade ,2006) reveals the significance of body marks, like tattoo, which are said to be made for symbolic or decorative purpose, and connected with marriage and birth, while others have magical purposes. Contemporary markings on the skin are forms of decoration that are still in use, in ceremonies, especially on the body of girls about to take part in festivals and rituals connected with marriage and birth. In the view of Omagu (2010) the art of body decoration is an ancient practice in Africa and every culture decorates, exposes, covers or alters the body for the sole interest of communicating specific ideas such as, imparting communal identity, lineage, religion and some distinct social messages in one way or the other. Indeed, Omagu has explored the body scarifications of the Bekwarra in a painting experiment.

Furthermore, some other artists have derived their source of inspiration either from natural or manmade objects for exploration in painting. For instance, Buhari, (1984) was inspired by Gwari life, while Chafe, (2000) created paintings from durbar decorative motifs which directly account for his inspiration in painting. Buhari (1984) maintains that sources of inspiration are available within our own environment and the proper places for artists to seek inspirational sources are no doubt within their immediate environment. It is in that regard that Buhari's study of Gwari forms brought to the fore, forms of the Gwari culture, which are peculiar to them. It is also against this backdrop that, Egonwa (2005) reviews the work of Uche Okeke who pioneered the *Uli* style of Igbo traditional art, inspired by the Uli Igbo drawings and paintings of the wall and human body decoration. Similarly (Filani 1997; Adepegba, 2006) examine the *Ona* decorative patterns, motifs, ornaments, patterns and designs peculiar to the rich

artistic culture of western Nigeria and observe that, it inspired a group of artists and became a rallying point for artistic exploration.

The Kambari people live in the North central part of Nigeria that surrounds Lake Kainji in Niger state. Historically, they live in hamlets and on farmlands. It has been claimed that after they had fled from Yauri at the time of Hausa Fulani jihads, they eventually settled at their present location. At Present, the Kambari people are mostly found in villages or small extended family settlements of fewer than hundreds and are known to build small settlements which they often abandoned, as people migrated towards them.

In the Kambari tradition, a person is seen to be ugly, anti-social, cowardly or poor, if he or she is without any form of body mark. The Kambari people have patterns and motifs that are highly decorative and developed through body markings, tattooing, staining of the body and many other types found all over the body. This aspect of Kambari culture is mostly practised amongst the females because it is considered as enhancing social status and beauty. These patterns and motifs are created by incising the body with sharp instruments like knives, razor blades, needles, shells and broken bottles, depending on the purpose. During this process the shape of the scarred tissue is carefully controlled on the part of the body being designed. Soot, animal fats, and plants oil, are applied on the scars to enable healing. Which sometimes form keloid. The women have more elaborate body decorative patterns than the men; the first mark a young woman receives is on her abdomen, emphasizing her role in child bearing. Body markings among the Kambari are timed around women's physiological changes such as puberty or child birth, which also signal the passage from one life stage to another such as the transition from betrothal (engagement) to marriage proper. This study was inspired by these marks on the surface of the skin that have an orientation of balance, beauty, repetition, line and texture.

The Kambari patterns and motifs are identified based on their characteristic elements and functions. There are some other Kambari body markings identified as patterns and motifs that have no specific names or significance.

## LINE AS A RUDIMENT OF DESIGN

Line is regarded as one of the most fundamental element of design. Any visual artistic expression starts with lines. Geometric (1970) cited in Lamidi(2010,13) define line as an "infinite number of points" and the artist view a line as a moving dot which describes shapes and make one recognize objects. Line to an artist is a graphic expression of his own thought form. It can therefore, communicate emotions as well as directions and movement. The superficial character of a line is controlled by the choice of material, medium and style or technique used to create it. Several artists from Paleolithic period to the twentieth Century employ line in one way or another in their artistic creation. Idiong (2004) Confirm that "the beginning of every drawing apart from dot is line". Line therefore, is not really a natural phenomenon but only an artistic device used to help us give meaning to shapes, form and design. A line then is an ideal given energy. The author further state that line "Speaks" It expresses action, mood and communicates effectively by itself or with other elements.

Ekong (2002) opines that "line is not drawn for drawing sake", rather it is for the purpose of communication as it describe objects, behaviour and transmit information from people and generates to generations. It is worthy of note, that the first recorded kind of cave art began with line. Likewise the Paleolithic and Mesolithic rocks are simple linear shelter drawings of historic events in civilization. For instance, African artists used lines, especially in their symbols or decorative arts. Calabashes, Smoking pipes, Stools, Drums, Fabric, walls and human body is decorated with motifs, which are essentially rendered in lines. Some lines are straight, some short, some are diagonal, circular or wavy, while others are broken lines. In the view of Ekong(2002) lines can speak stability, stimulate textures or light and shade, line can deceive(the eye) or speak ambiguous language and can be chaotic if charge as such. For instance basic lines such as vertical, horizontal, diagonal, spiral and curve have some general personalities- vertical line been positive, horizontal lines been passive and suggest horizon, the body at rest and speak quietness and immobility etc. The speechless of diagonal lines are on instability, movement, talking, tension and drama etc. They are lines of action. Curve lines which may appear as waves, loops, scrabble for spirals are sometimes referred to as rhythmic lines. They speak of sweeping, turning, winding, bending. They tell the on looker of for instance the edges of the clouds.

The qualities of lines make it possible for language of lines to touch people's emotions and affect or suggest mood. Nervous quick stroke can add a feeling of tension or drama to a drawing or painting. A firm smooth line may give assurance and treats the viewer to peaceful and calm observation.

## Kambari patterns and motifs

The Kambari body markings rely heavily on linearity- characteristic of art whose primary sources of inspiration are traditional motifs that can be seen on other traditional art forms like the Uli, Ona and the durbar decorative motifs.

These motifs are mostly geometrical patterns of triangle, pyramids, rectangular ones and squares are scarcely used except when they enhances the design meanings. These motifs are used purely for aesthetic value and have cultural significance, which are connected to marriage, birth, while others have magical purposes. These linear motifs for body decorations are still in use in ceremonies, especially on the body of girls about to take part in a festival and rituals connected to marriage and birth. The Kambari body markings is solely use to communicate specific ideals such as, imparting communal identity, lineage, religion, and some distinct social messages in one way or the other. It is in the light of the above that Adepegba (1995) advocated that some children and even members of the royal family in Benin kingdom adorn their chest and wear facial marks, bearing a vertical one inch marks made below the eye wall to sickly children in order to wade off constant sickness, which are later regarded as identification marks.

In the Kambari tradition, a person is seen ugly, anti social, cowardly or poor, if he or she is without any form of body marks. These marks are highly decorative and developed through body marking, tattooing, staining of the body and many others found all over the body. This aspect of Kambari culture is mostly practiced amongst the females as this is considered to enhance their social status and beauty. These linear motifs are created by incising the body with sharp instrument like knives, razor blades, broken bottles, shells, depending on the purpose and situation .During this process the shape of the scarred tissue is carefully controlled on the part of the body being designed. Soot, animal fat and plant oil are applied on the scars to enable healing. For instance, the first vertical mark a woman receives on her upper abdomen emphasizes her role in child bearing. The body markings among the Kambari are timed around women's physiological changes such as puberty or child birth, which also signals the passage from one life stage to another such as transition from betrothal (engagement) to marriage proper. Examples of such linear motifs are a new bride. Figure 1, a photograph of a newly wedded Kambari girl and others.



**Figure 1, new bride**  
**Photograph by Aliyu Mohammed**  
**Ganla market Agwara LGA, Niger state**



**Figure 2, a married woman**  
**Photograph by Aliyu Mohammed**  
**Govanti market, Borgu LGA Niger state**



**Figure 3, a young girl**  
**Photograph by Aliyu Mohammed**  
**Govanti Market, Borgu LGA Niger state**

## Identification and meaning of Kambari linear patterns and motifs

*Idani Aguji* (marks on the side cheek) indicate a person's clan or cult in Kambari society. *Epeti* (patterns on the forehead) is a symbol of bravery. *Vukpoko* (mark on the upper cheek) is a mark given to a child to wade off spirit if the child is fond of crying at night. *Kachuna* (marks on the upper abdomen) are the first marks a woman receives on her upper abdomen preparing her for child bearing. Finally, *Kucheni* (patterns on the back) signal the life stages such as betrothals and marriage. The patterns and motifs are identified based on their characteristic elements and functions. There are also other Kambari body markings identified as patterns and motifs that have no specific names or significance. They are only lines for decorative purposes. Therefore, names are assigned to the motifs as synonyms for easy identification and classification based on their characteristic features. Omagu (2010) observes that not all African patterns have symbolic meanings. Some linear or geometrical patterns merely follow the texture of the medium in order to have continuity of design across the area of decoration.

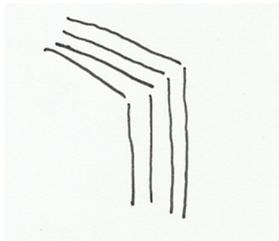


Plate I: *Aguji* (side cheek)



Plate II: *Epeti* (fore head)



Plate III: *Vukpoko* (upper cheek)



Plate IV: *Kachuna* (stomach)

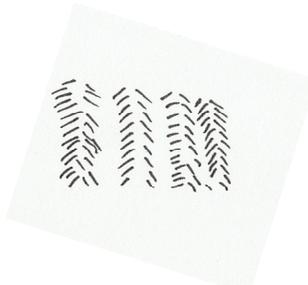


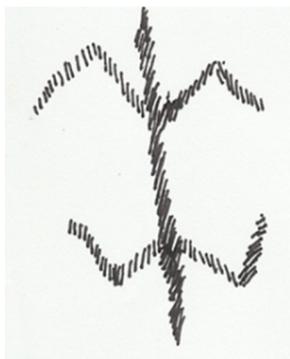
Plate V: *Kucheni* (rear view)



Plate VI: *Shawu* (thin)



Plate VII: *Gasa* (melt)



**Plate.VIII: Nekere(girl)**



**Plate IX: Kenu vuka (small girl)**

## CONCLUSION

From the foregoing appraisal of Kambari patterns and motifs, it is discovered that the Kambari body markings shows dexterity and dynamism in the use of lines. It has also shown that linear patterns and motifs would continually be employed by traditional artists, Paleolithic and Mesolithic artist for visual expression, as been practiced by minimalist and postmodernists. Lines as patterns and motifs are not confined to only a particular group of artists or traditional art, as it is the bases rudiment of art as an element of design to create forms that have significant meanings.

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