

**AN ANALYSIS OF EXPLORATORY PAINTINGS WITH THE DAGI MOTIF****Ibrahim Umoru & Aondover Gabriel Gyegwe****Abstract**

"Dagi is the Hausa word for "feline paw". It is a prominent motif and symbol in northern Nigeria. It is found on the decorated walls of Hausa palaces and homes. It is also found on decorative and utilitarian utensils. The focus of this study is narrowed to this motif which serves as a medium for personal expression for artists. However, this does not prevent it from serving other purposes. The study has already been carried out in postgraduate research, which identified the non-utilisation of the motif as a singular focus of painters. The objectives are to; explore the rich artistic qualities of the Dagi motif, appreciate the artistic forms peculiar to the Dagi motif, transform the Dagi motif forms into compositional purposes in painting, and make the research a source material for further reference in artistic work. The objective of exploring the motif is at this moment focused on through a qualitative analysis of selected paintings. This exploration sets the tone for further paintings creating the transformative stage. The term "exploration" involves a search for artistic ideas for further work in the studio. Notably, Dagi has equivalents in other parts of the world.

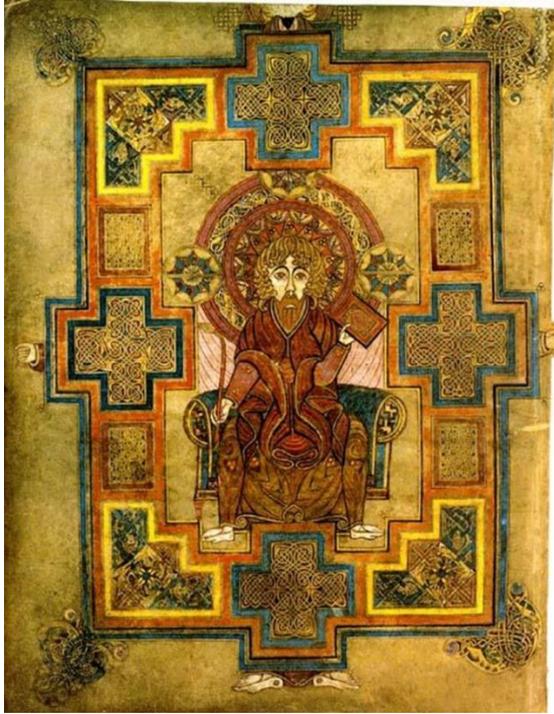
**Keywords:** Dagi, exploration, motif, analysis.

**Introduction**

The "Dagi" is a prominent motif and symbol in northern Nigeria. It is found on the decorated walls of Hausa walls of palaces and homes. This motif serves as a medium for personal expression for many artists. However, it does not prevent it from serving other purposes. While its origin in Nigeria is not clear, it is obvious that the motif has a close source from the Celtic knot designs from Ireland, and it has evolved to be incorporated into Christianity and other forms of decorations and thereafter adopted by other cultures around the world. The

Celtic knots have different spiritual and philosophical meanings that are embedded in the cultural belief systems. Similarly, Muzdakis (2020) states that; Pre-Christian Celtic art contained geometric motifs such as spirals, key patterns, and step patterns. The first interlace patterns—looping, braiding, and knotting—arrived on the British Isles with the Romans in the third or fourth century CE. As England, Scotland, and Ireland became Christian, the artwork of these areas began to transform. Around 600 CE, local Celtic traditions merged with Anglo-Saxon to produce the insular style of art, which would

dominate the early medieval period in Britain and Ireland. Interlaced motifs became an integral part of insular illuminated



Celtic knot designs as seen in the "Book of Kells," an illuminated manuscript displaying insular art.

(Photo: Wikimedia Commons [Public domain])

"This Celtic Knot meaning is said to be strength, balance and harmony, a core concept of Celtic culture. It is also believed to symbolise community and belonging, and perhaps even the eternal oneness that states we're all—Gods, humans, animals, and plants alike—descended from the same root".

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, (2000) defines a motif as

manuscripts and metalwork, particularly in the work of Irish Celtic monks.

a design or a pattern used as a decoration. Banjoko (2000) sees a motif as a unit of a design or major theme in artwork, especially in pattern making. Motifs can be formed from natural or artificial objects like abstract, geometric, regular or irregular shapes. (Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, 1983) sees a symbol as an emblem; which by custom or convention represents something else while a motif is a theme, subject, an element in a composition, especially a dominant element. It is often symbolic.

Nataf (1994) is of the view that "a symbol is not a simple convention as is the case in mathematics. Symbolism is not a language, but a way of speaking; it is much more than a collection of signs. A true symbol always designates the being - in - the world". The Dagi motif is subject to constant concrete adaptation to the ever-changing fields of its application and this has given rise to various stylizations, transformation but not beyond recognition. Today, as people travel long distances but are increasingly indifferent about learning other people's languages, the role of the sign can become an important means of communication. Holmes (1985)

stated that a symbol stands for something. It is visually precise;



Plate I: "Dagi" Motif, Source:

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=www.pinterest.com>

It attempts to get at the essence of an idea and by repeated use can come to equal it. This is captured by Frutiger, (1989) thus;

*word or speech, written or spoken, do not appear to play any part at all in the mechanism of my thought processes.*

*The basic psychic elements of thought are certain signs and more or less clear pictures, which can be reproduced and combined to order.*

Often, motifs have been an integral part of human society and it is believed that even language and the art of writing are all woven into symbolism. One of the earliest forms of writing (hieroglyphs) is said to have

originated from various motifs and symbols embedded in the day-to-day life of human beings.

### Background of the Study

There are many languages in northern Nigeria. But the most widely spoken language is Hausa, with Islam as the dominant religion. Islam's doctrine of non-representational art has been an important catalyst in northern Nigeria's artistic development. Heathcote, (1979) a historian, opined that the earliest history of the Hausa people is obscure. Bayajida, a ruler of Baghdad, is said to have come to Borno from Baghdad. There he married Majira; a daughter of the reigning king. When Bayajida's life was threatened he fled, taking with him his wife and his horses. Eventually, he reached Daura. On the way, his wife, who was pregnant, was left at Biram. She gave birth to a son and when he grew up he became the ruler there. Having arrived in Daura, Bayajida killed a large snake, called Sarki which lived in the local well and allowed water to be drawn only on Fridays. In return for his service, the queen of Daura married Bayajida. She bore him a son, Bawo, in his turn had six sons. These became the rulers of Daura, Kano, Katsina, Zazzau (Zaria), Gobir, and Rano. With Biram, these formed the

original seven Hausa states, the Hausa Bakwai.

### The 'Dagi'

So far, no certain spot has been marked to be the birthplace of the Dagi even though some speculations hold that it is from the oriental world, Jefferson (1974) in quoting Heathcote, states that "The precise origin of many of the motifs used in Hausa embroidery will probably never be known. Variations of some, such as the Dagi (knot), can be found in various parts of Africa which are far removed from one another". However, Heathcote (1979) also wrote that it is certain that silk fabrics were being woven in southern Spain and northern Africa in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and that some of the patterns on them incorporated motifs such as the eight-pointed star, the motif of two interlaced ovals (known by the Hausas as Dagi), and various geometric – interlace devices. All these motifs eventually turned up in Hausa embroidery or other forms of Hausa decorative art as shown below;



Plate II: Title: Gown Embroidery showing  
dagi amongst other motifs

Photo- D. H. Heathcote, PhD Dissertation  
1979

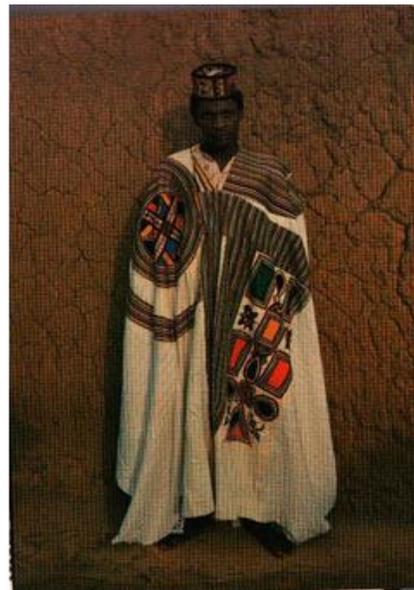


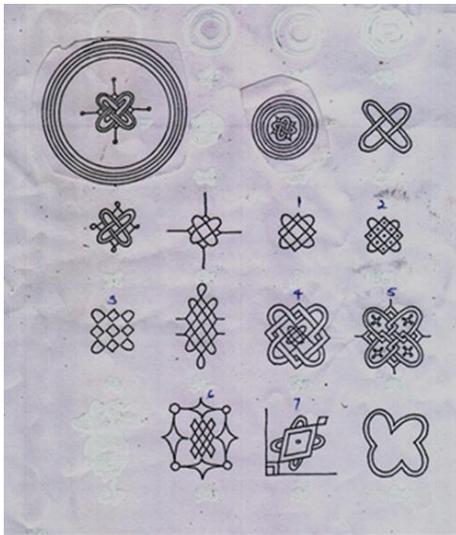
Plate III: Another Gown Embroidery with  
Dagi amidst other motifs.

Photo – D.H. Heathcote PhD Dissertation  
1979



Study of the Dagi Symbol

D.H Heatcote PhD Dissertation 1979



Drawing of Dagi by Alhaji Sani of Kano

D.H Heatcote PhD Dissertation 1979

The interest of the researchers lies in the artistic rather than the traditional or historical aspect of the Dagi. The motif is believed to have been inspired by the star and is associated with royalty that is embedded in the northern Nigerian aristocratic nature or philosophy. The Dagi if seen as a whole; the experiences are in complete harmony with each other and if viewed, evoke a strange visual tension which offers many interesting possibilities for painting. The play of light upon the knot Dagi can be interesting as certain areas reflect or refract light with fascinating results.

This paper problematizes the absence of artistic exploration of the northern knot motif as a single visual subject by artists. Dagi is a motif incorporated into almost all northern Nigerian artistic expressions such as cultural and traditional embroidery, wall decorations, architectural design and durbar. It has equally evolved over some time into different shapes, designs and patterns. This study manipulates the Dagi for visual expressions as well as unfolding its aesthetic values and qualities. The research explores the rich artistic qualities of the Dagi motif and appreciates the artistic forms peculiar to the Dagi motif.

Significantly, This study may promote sociocultural and aesthetic awareness among

the diverse ethnic groups in northern Nigeria as well as synthesise the cultural tradition that surrounds the Dagi motif with contemporary dynamics of art, with the view of providing a springboard for further studies in the projection of the traditional motifs in northern Nigeria through painting. It is observed that not much has been documented through appropriate visual sources on the Dagi motif. This study therefore explores the aesthetic potentials of the motif. In doing this, a painterly pathway for understanding the motif is hence established within the scope of the traditional symbolic motifs of the Hausa known as Dagi as found in the Zaria Emirate, (Council or Area). However, a paucity of literature appears to be scanty on the dagi motif, and some of the artisans had no Western education, so the researcher had difficulty in communicating.

In reviewing the literature, although, motifs represent the dominant artistic expression of the Hausa, available records reveal that few artists have attempted to isolate Dagi for painting. Most motifs are symbolic, from the information obtained from a series of unstructured interviews and various research findings. "Dagi" is believed to have been inspired by the star which is considered by astrologers to be the father figure. Fenton,

(1991) states that "the sun is a star, but astrologers tend to call everything in the solar system a planet for the sake of convenience. The sun is regarded as the first of the personal planets, representing the active decision-making side of a subject's nature". The star is associated with strength, personal achievement leadership qualities, power and authority. It denotes adulthood and a grown-up attitude to life. It is concerned with creativity of all kinds, whether this be designing and building an object, a home, a business or a family. The star's placement also indicates how a person feels about creative endeavours. The star is intensely personal and is a strong pointer to the subject's modus operandi. Each day, the blue sky dominated by the sun changes to darkness, from the depths of which the star appears giving a sense of the infinity of the universe.

Frutiger (1989) is of the view that in all pictorial representation, with the causes of these heavenly bodies expressed as "paths" and "ways", one can say, in a narrow sense, that the northern knot, in all its diversity, is loaded with serious emotions pointing to the future by comprising and conserving something of the past.

Some artists whose works have been found relevant for this study are Akin Afuwape (1984), Robert Ogenyi (1989), Jerry Buhari (1992), Chafe Ismail Shehu (1995), Kaltume Gana (2008) Jummai Ogbe (2000)



Plate IV, "Children of Martyrs", 1992, Jerry Buhari, Oil on Canvas, 113.5x82.5cm, Source: Catalogue, three from Zaria Goeth Institute (German Cultural Centre Lagos)

The lower part of the painting Jerry Buhari's "Children of Matyrs" suggests a woven motif, the artist used a knot to suggest an idea of bondage, the work portrays captivity, and the helpless and unsafe nature of life especially as it pertains to the child. The knot which ties the subject of the work bears resemblance with the Dagi in the researcher's view and the enigma of the knot captures the

socio-political circumstance of the northerners and other regions of Nigeria today.

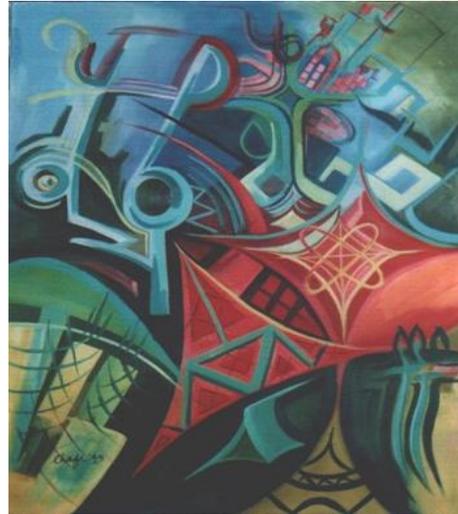


Plate V, "Horse Regalia", 1995, Chafe Shehu Ismail, Oil on Canvas, 75x90cm, Unpublished MFA Thesis Ahmadu Bello University Zaria,, 1995.

"Horse Regalia" vividly illustrates the various motifs in a simplified manner, the Dagi motif which symbolizes power and authority is interlocked with other motifs. In this work, balance and movement are achieved through the representation of motifs closely related to the Dagi in the background with various brush strokes and the contrast of red and green with red spotting through the Dagi motif is an indication of the symbolic power and authority embedded in this Dagi knot. In this piece of painting, Chafe harnessed the Dagi to create a "Horse Regalia

which is an asset amongst the nobles like Emirs. Therefore, "Dagi" once again is significant in this context in radiating one of the paraphernalia of power in northern Nigerian emirates.



Plate VI, "Emir's Regalia II", 1995, Chafe Shehu Ismail, Oil on Canvas, 90x100cm, Unpublished MFA Thesis Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1995.

In "Emir's Regalia", the motifs were also used to create a rhythmic balance. The artist emphasized the Dagi prominently at the centre of the painting with yellow suggesting light (star). The Dagi motif which is inspired by the star is seen radiating light at the centre of the green background. This work is relevant to the study because it clearly shows the light in the star which the Dagi knot represents to the Hausa. Once again, "Dagi" is the source of inspiration in this work. The painter taps into the rich aesthetic value of the "Dagi" motif to create a work psychically

inspired by the star as embedded in the Hausa traditional cosmology.

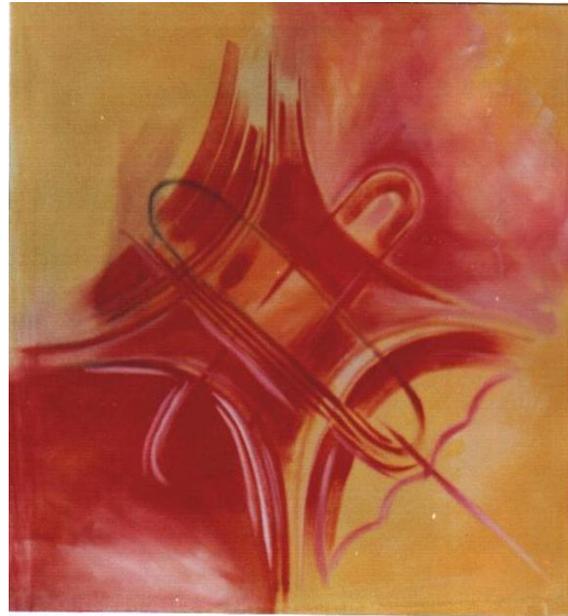


Plate VII, "The Northern Knot and Umbrella", 1995, Chafe Shehu Ismail, Oil on Canvas, 76x79cm, Unpublished MFA Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, 1995.

"The Northern Knot and Umbrella", painting used the Northern knot as a single element of design. Different shades of red and yellow are used. Here the umbrella is not prominent. Chafe appears to be different in approach in this work by his use of minimal colour and motifs. Although the colour of the background and that of this motif blend the motif still retains its symbolic prominence and dignity in the work. "Dagi" is used here essentially for aesthetic purposes as the singular projection of the Dagi motif in this

contest with different lines of yellow, creates a synthesis of deep floral appeal, thereby embellishing the umbrella which serves as a canopy of safety, security and authority in Northern Nigeria.



Plate VIII, "Emir's Trumpeter", 2000,  
Jummai Ogbe, Oil on Canvas, 57x89cm,  
Unpublished MFA Thesis Ahmadu Bello  
University, Zaria, 2000

The trumpet and the hand of the figure are visible and other motifs used, the Dagi which is the centre of study in this research stands out, which made this work relevant to the research. The northern knot (Dagi) is aimed at representing the rhythm of the music produced, also in this work the dark and bold representation of the knot (Dagi) is used to create the much-needed contrast. The work draws our attention to the relationship between the performing and the visual or decorative art of the Hausa. In Northern Nigeria, the trumpet popularly known as "khakaki" is an instrument blown to herald the appearance of the Emir. In this work, the

trumpet is superimposed on the "Dagi" motif thereby synthesizing authority and ovation as captured in this work.



Plate IX, "Queen Amina of Zaria", 2002,  
Jummai Ogbe, Oil on Canvas, 78x98cm,  
Unpublished MFA Thesis Ahmadu Bello  
University, Zaria 2000

In "Queen Amina of Zaria", it is made clear that the northern knot is truly a symbol of royalty, the political leader Queen Amina is expressed in a rhythmic atmosphere through the use of various motifs revolving around the Dagi. The motifs are woven together on a blue background, and the Dagi at the far lower left of the work is presented in a manner that the centre of interest is captured at that side of the painting. Again the "Dagi", motif is used to capture the essence and the majesty of power. The inspiration in this regard is not far-fetched;

the "Dagi" continued to symbolize power, authority, and valour which is the hallmark of the Zaria Emirate.

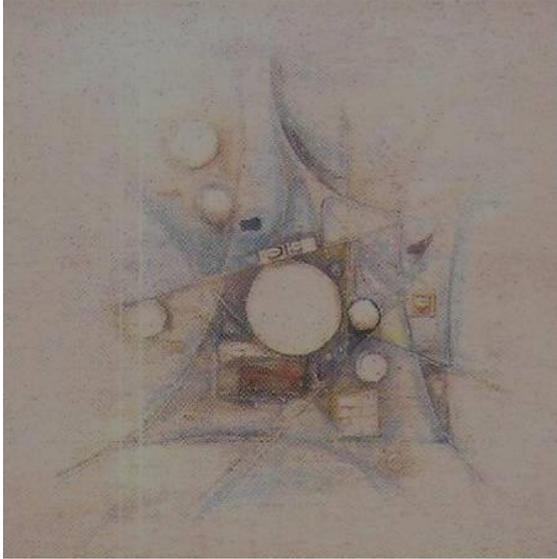


Plate X, "Plus Jamais Ca", 2004, Donatien Alihonou, Not given, The Pan-African Circle of Artists Pearls and Gold-Enugu 2004

The expression of line and colour and the aesthetic splendour and achievement of rhythmic balance with the use of symbols, make "Plus Jamais Ca", the work significant to this study. There is a harmonious use of colour and the movement of the motifs, these motifs seem to blend into the background and foreground at the middle of the work is an opening, giving the impression of a tunnel concealed with motifs, when looked at generally, the work is in no doubt truly African and shares the same source with all other works in this review.



Plate XI, "Gidan Dan Hausa", 2008, Kaltume Gana, Oil on Canvas, 83 x 66cm, Atmosphere - A publication of National Gallery of Art, Nigeria

"Gidan Dan Hausa", derives inspiration from the artists' native tradition, the architectural design bearing conspicuously the famous Dagi motif as used by the Hausa, especially at the main entrance. This work is found to be relevant for this study as the explicit use of the famous Dagi can be seen around the doorpost of the building. Other abstract decorative motifs can also be seen in the work.



Plate XII, "Fulani Milkmaid", 2008, Kunle Adeyemi, Not given, Catalogue Traditional Och Stanid 2009

In "Fulani Milkmaid", the artist influenced by the beauty of the Hausa culture, used Vorex skillfully in embellishing various motifs forming an interesting background for the typical Fulani woman Milkmaid. At a glance, the motifs are scattered all over the work, and the artist draws attention to the rich heritage of African culture, only tints and shades of brown (earth colour) are used. The motifs are not only used as decoration but also as symbolic elements, the figure stands out solidly as it is rendered in subtle colour to suggest life. In this work, the aesthetic potency of the "Dagi" motif is unarguably visible. The artist has tapped into the malleability of the motif to vary his idea of beauty in the culture of Northern Nigeria.

From the paintings shown so far, it is not far-fetched that the "Dagi" motif has continued to serve as an unfettered source of ideas for artists in northern Nigeria and elsewhere around the world as already shown among the Celts. Thus, in line to isolate the "Dagi" motif as a source of inspiration and mode of expression for artists, this review of paintings has shown extensively that the "Dagi" motif is indeed a symbolic source of inspiration that will continuously serve as inspiration for artists.

#### **Analysis of Exploratory Paintings by Ibrahim Umoru**

For this analysis, selected paintings from the first category which are essentially exploratory have been presented and analysed below. The first category isolates and highlights the Dagi paintings as this stage dwells on the motif as a unit of expression, and attention is focused on the motif form.



Plate XIII, Ibrahim Umoru, Northern Knot I,  
112 x 104cm, Oil on Canvas, 2008

"Northern Knot I", is a representational work, yellow is the dominant colour. However, red, green and blue are seen on the main Dagi motif, while purple compliments the yellow. The rhythm and movement of the brush strokes emphasize the strength of the symbolic meaning of the Dagi: Power and Authority. The painting depicts only the Dagi motif on a busy background. The knot in the painting is partially tilted toward the left-hand side of the canvas.



Plate XIV, Ibrahim Umoru, From the Sea,  
91x 69cm, Oil and Enamel on Canvas, 2008

In "From the Sea", the Dagi motif is in a solid state; with a thick lump of enamel paint, the painting is in a yellow scheme. Suffused with the blue sea water, this work is characterised by the use of minimal colour, to create a holistic atmosphere of royalty. The outline of the Dagi knot is built out vividly, demonstrating how the motif could be used as a subject of a composition. It adds vigour and balance to the painting. The motif shifted to the right side with some part of it out of the composition, while the blue surf (water wave) at the lower left creates a rhythmic movement.



Plate XV, Ibrahim Umoru, Mother Earth,  
52x64cm, Gouache on Paper, 2008

In "Mother Earth" only tints and shades of brown and yellow are used, the knot is prominent in this painting as it appears to be muddy with the use of earth colour though the outline is faint. This type of representation of the knot is seen on buildings as design, the circular movement and centralisation of the knot are suggestive of the motif as a medium of communication. In this approach, the motif is concealed within the motif.



Plate XVI, Ibrahim Umoru, Northern Knot II,  
86x82cm, Oil and Enamel on Canvas, 2008

In "Northern Knot II", Dagi appears to carry more weight on a blue flat background. To avoid monotony and create rhythm, the motif is reduced to mere lines of Prussian blue and red. This painting is an attempt to represent the various ways of expression and possibilities that abide in the unique knot as it is not only used as decoration but also as a symbolic motif for power and authority in northern Nigeria and deeper spiritual connotations among the Celts. A close examination of the spiral line in the painting is suggestive of speed or flow. The illusion of movement revolving around the entire work creates a contrast between negative and positive space.

### Conclusion

The "Dagi" which has consistently inspired artists or painters is an inexhaustible inspirational and functional icon for both old and contemporary artists. It is, therefore, the summation of this research, as further studies of "Dagi" such as this will allow painters to continually explore, it as a tool for such artistry. The use of the dagi has roots in the ancient Celts with its' usage in the Christian church. Its spiritual applications have equally been captured as the Celtic Knot meaning is said to be strength, balance and harmony, a core concept of Celtic culture. It is also

believed to symbolise community and belonging, and perhaps even the eternal oneness that states; "we're all—Gods, humans, animals, and plants alike—descended from the same root". While northern Nigeria sees it as a symbol of power and authority, the artists appreciate it from the vantage position as a source of inspiration for artistic exploration as shown in the paintings of Ibrahim Umoru and other reviewed paintings by other artists.

### **Recommendation**

Drawing from the varied research analysis, and literature review in this project, it is pertinent to say by way, of recommendation that the artistic potential of the "Dagi" is vast and inexhaustible. Therefore, contemporary painters both within and outside the academia should further explore the "Dagi" for painting. This underscores the relevance of "Dagi" which has continued to inspire painters who are in constant need of iconic inspirational materials.

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