VON ÄGYPTEN ZUM TSCHADSEE

EINE LINGUISTISCHE REISE DURCH AFRIKA

Festschrift für Herrmann Jungraithmayr
zum 65. Geburtstag

herausgegeben von

DYMITR IBRISZIMOW · RUDOLF LEGER · UWE SEIBERT

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NUPE CHILDREN'S SONGS
AND SINGING-GAMES

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1. Introduction

Ethnomusicology and the study of song-texts in Africa still remain something of a poor relation to the study of oral literature. The study of children's repertoires, both spoken and sung, are still less extensively documented, due to the low prestige they have for outside investigators. Yet children's repertoires are often as intriguing as those of adults, in part because they remain so distinct. Moreover, particular genres of children's oral literature are often spread over vast swathes of the continent, in contrast to the culture-specific performances of adults.

The documentation of rhymes, songs and singing-games has a long history in Europe and a fair amount of academic respectability, although such oral literature is usually classed as "folklore". In the case of England, the pioneering studies have been carried out by Iona and Peter Opie (1959, 1985), systematically covering the wide range of children's oral literature. Their style of minute documentation and historical scholarship, eschewing socioeconomic or psychological analysis, has set the agenda for many subsequent studies.

In Africa, children's culture has often been studied as an entity and the pioneering works in this respect are undoubtedly those of Marcel Griaule (1938) who documented children's performances among the Dogon of West Africa. From the same school of ethnology is Béart's (1955) vast compilation for West Africa, which includes games and songs crossculturally in conjunction with toys and other types of oral literature. A specifically musicological study which remains unique is Blacking's (1967) study of Venda children's songs, which attempts to understand the compositional and structure processes underlying rhythms and melodies. Egblewogbe (1975) represents an interesting attempt to relate songs and singing games of the Ewe people of Ghana to traditional educational and socialising processes. Each children's song is classified according to its function in the educational process (op. cit, p. 71).

Nigeria has remained largely untouched by these studies and in the case of the Middle Belt peoples there is virtually no background literature. This paper will aim to describe the context of children's songs and games among

the Nupe people of west-central Nigeria as well as providing some examples of transcribed texts.[1]

2. Social context

2.1 Nupe society

Nupe society has been described at some length by NADEL (1941, 1954), Nupe language by various authors (see bibliography in BLENCH, 1989) and Nupe music in BLENCH (1985). The Nupe are a numerous people divided into many subgroups, some of which are linguistically distinct. Subsistence patterns vary according to the ecology of the region, but the Nupe encompass both the yam-based systems characteristic of the forest edge and the cereal and legume rainfed subsistence agriculture of the semi-arid savanna. There are specialised Nupe fishing groups as well as extensive flood-cultivated rice along the Niger river.

Nupe are also divided culturally between the Muslim towns, especially Bida, and the countryside, formerly dominated by traditional religion, but now most commonly affiliated to one or another Christian church. Although the Nupe have a distinctive Muslim culture adopted in the late eighteenth century, they have also been heavily affected in this century by the urban Hausa ethos of the larger Northern cities. Hausa was a common second language in their towns until recently and remains a major influence. Urban speech and song-texts are often interpenetrated with Hausa loan-words.

2.2 Gender divisions

One of the most distinctive aspects of the repertoire is the strong gender division, in terms of performance. In Bida town, a survey of girls' groups suggested that they would know approximately four times as many songs and singing games as their brothers. In numerical terms this is something like forty items against ten. The reason for this disparity is somewhat paradoxical; girls usually have much less time for play than boys. The spread of primary school attendance has a slight tendency to even out these differ-

ences, but in the holidays the disparity is evident. Girls are required to spend the greater part of the day in the compound helping their mother or other relatives. Otherwise, they are expected to go out marketing. The consequence is that when they do have free time, usually in the early evening, especially on moonlit nights, they tend to play in a formalised and rather intensive fashion.

Boys, on the other hand, are allowed more free time and spend more of it in unstructured play. They give energy to the construction of physical objects such toy guns and model cars, as well as gathering wild fruits and catching small animals to cook and eat. They also invent more ephemeral games, such as competitive jumping off a sandbank. As a result, they devote less time to structured games.

Another related division is the age of those playing games. In the town, a typical group may contain girls of ages between six and sixteen years. This broadly corresponds to the span of years in which a girl will go marketing before she is marriageable. Boys, on the other hand, will usually give up this type of playing and singing when they are 11-12 years old, i. e. at the onset of puberty. This is probably the reflection of the now-vanished *ena* system of age-grades (NADEL, 1941, pp. 383-401). Girls typically had single associations which lasted until marriage. Boys, in contrast, had a complex system of ranks divided into at least three age-grades.

2.3 Urban/rural division

There are also important differences between urban and rural repertoires. Nupe in the town tend to attribute a greater profundity of Nupe culture to rural communities, while at the same time remaining contemptuous of their lack of sophistication. In the town I was frequently told by adults that I would be able to collect more children's games and songs in the villages compared with Bida. In numerical terms, this is simply not true; the size of the repertoire of a given play-group is roughly the same. What is true, is that rural village playgroups have a "purer" repertoire in that the texts almost always use only the Nupe language. In the towns, by contrast, the children are exposed to a much greater span of metropolitan influences; their songs absorb Hausa and English loanwords and games develop to imitate and mediate urban experience. Vehicles, foreigners, military parades and school are all material for urban children. Adults therefore often stereotype urban play as "corrupt" or "mixed"; in reality, children in the town are simply making sense of their experience in a way entirely comparable to those in a rural environment.

3. The repertoire

3.1 Categories

Nupe children, like most African peoples, have an extensive range of children's songs and singing games. The total size of the repertoire cannot be established without more extensive survey, but any given group of children are likely to know some forty songs and singing games. The division of the repertoire is broadly as follows;

ècìn[2]	story, folk-tale *also* riddle, proverb
ení	song with or without physical action
enyà	dance, also singing-games

None of these terms is specific to children's activities; *ècìn, ení, enyà* are equally applied to adult performances. Some children's games have specific names, often derived from a prominent word in the song-text. Stories told by children often include songs repeated several times during the course of the narrative and these songs sometimes appear in turn associated with singing-games.

3.2 Melodies

This paper will not attempt to transcribe the melodies of the quoted songs. However, it should be emphasised that these *are* songs, and every one has a well-structured tune and usually a well-marked rhythm. The compass is usually quite restricted and nearly all melodies remain within a fifth. Since the Nupe language is highly tonal, with the pitch of each syllable important in constructing meaning, song melodies usually follow syllable pitch. This seems to be less true for children's songs, perhaps because the sense of the words is less important and the essential is the strongly marked rhythm.

3.3 Instruments

Some African peoples have quite elaborate children's instrumentaria; a wide range of sound-producers are known to children and used for all types of music. This does not seem to be the case among the Nupe. The principal

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[2] The orthography used for the Nupe examples is adapted from BANFIELD (1914–1916). Nasalised vowels are represented by a following "n" rather than the subdot favoured by BANFIELD. The fricatives /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ are represented by "sh" and "zh", rather than ṣ and ẓ. Tones are ´ for high tone, ` for low tone and mid-tone is unmarked. Translations are from the informants and usually, but not always, can be matched to dictionary definitions. *dem.* is demonstrative and *euph.* indicates a particle is included for euphony.

instruments made by children are those imitating adult instruments. For example, boys can often be seen with a drum that imitates the adult *enya*, a two-headed barrel drum struck with a curved stick. The children's version has a tin can for a barrel and the head is polythene laced on with scrap rubber. However, it is not used for accompanying songs from the children's repertoire but rather in imitations of adult performances. Similarly, boys may cut hollow pawpaw stems to imitate the *kàkàkì*, the long trumpet played for the ruler, the Etsu Nupe, but not to accompany children's songs. Girls' playgroups may beat on an upturned enamel basin to perform versions of women's songs.

4. Text examples

4.1 Simple songs

Simple songs are sung by children to themselves or in small group and correspond best to nursery rhymes. The texts are certainly as obscure as any nursery rhyme, without the benefit of the historical documentation available for English examples to clarify the meaning. Examples 1–3 give the texts of some common verses, known to nearly every Nupe child.

1.
etsú	*na*	*ló*	*dùkùn*	*na,*	*aratwá!*
rat	*dem.*	enters	cookpot	*dem.*	short and fat

cinginni		*be*	*mĭkòte,*		*aratwá!*
pounded yam		with	shea-butter		short and fat

2.
ebá	*da*	*kòrìkòtĭ*	*nyimi*	*da*	*wàwàgì*	*o?*
husband	is	unskilled	wife	is	small	question

kínkèrè	*tun*	*'bá*	*ebá*	*tsu*
scorpion	stings	husband	husband	dies

3.
èyà,	*kingbàgà*	*na*	*mi*	*yébó*	*na*
friend	sheep	*dem.*	I	like	*dem.*

kingbàgbà	*nyá*	*mi*	*áya*
sheep	own	me	is lost

èyà,	*bǎbo*	*mi*	*'a*	*le*	*kingbàgbà*	*na*
friend,	where	I	will	see	sheep	*dem.*

mi	*yébó*	*na*	*yi*	*o?*
I	like	*dem.*	is	question.

Children can be taught these songs by other children or by adults.

4.2 Singing games

The singing game is the most important part of children's repertoire. Most singing-games are accompanied by physical action; in some cases these match the words of the song. Singing-games may derive from something observed in the environment such as the behaviour of a wild animal or be simply abstract. These songs are not thought of as composed; children learn them from other groups.

Groups playing singing-games together may be mixed-sex only if the children are very young. As soon as the girls involved become a little older, children separate into gender-based groups. There may be gender-specific games, but this is not easy to determine as it is much less common to see boys playing these games. Many of these singing-games are widespread in West Africa; parallels are found in GRIAULE (1938) and BÉART (1955). Examples 4–6 below describe some examples of singing-games with texts and translations.

"Baboon"

One game that is equally popular with both sexes is *gbogi* or "baboon". In this game two players raise their arms and touch hands to form an arch. The other children run through the arch in single file while the standing players attempt to slap them on the back. To succeed, the best players must adopt the all-fours gait and rapid speed of a baboon. The text accompanying the song is:

4.	*kpa*	*ronce,*	*gbogi*		*na*	*gwoga*		*na,*
	form	arch	baboon		*dem.*	passes		*dem.*
	wun	*be*	*gwoga,*		*yi*	*le*		*ye*
	it	comes	passes		we	see [it]		

Urban children have little idea of either the appearance or posture of a baboon, but the game is played with equal enthusiasm in town and countryside.

"Pull on the vine"

In this game, played by girls, each player takes a cloth and ties it around her waist, leaving a strip hanging down behind her like a tail. The players then run round in a circle, each one holding the cloth of the girl in front. They then pull as hard as possible on each others' cloths in order to try and break the circle. The game usually ends with the players collapsed on the ground.

As they run round, they sing the following song:

5.	*aga*	*din*	*'nu,*	*enu*	*ʃe*	*din*	*kuso*
	pull		vine	vine	is	in	forest

The inspiration is the thick trailing vines in the wooded areas that are gathered for craftwork and medicine. It is likely that before children owned cloths, the game may have been played with actual vines.

"Buying palm-kernel oil"   •

This is the single longest, most complex and most fantastical of the children's songs and encompasses a variety of ideas. It accompanies a game played by girls, and is usually known by its first line. The players stand on their left leg with the right leg stretched directly out in front of them, resting on the similarly outstretched leg of their neighbour. This creates an interlocking circle of legs. The lead singer calls out the lines of the song and the other girls respond with a chorus of *Ayio, Ayio!* at the end of each line. At line 23, the response changes to *Koro!* and the girls all twist round to face outwards, preserving the interlocking of their legs. They then begin to hop, so that the circle gradually moves round. Only the final line actually appears to refer to the movements of the singing-game. GRIAULE (1938, p. 133) recorded this game played by young boys among the Dogon, who call it the "bird's nest".

The text is given below, divided into sections, and an analysis of the song follows the text.

6. A.

1.		*'à*	*shi*	*'dĭn,*		*'a*	*shi*	*'dĭn*
	[we]	will	buy	palm-kernel oil		will	buy	palm-kernel oil

Response to each sung line is *Ayio! Ayio!*

2.	*yi*	*'à*	*'dĭn*	*shi*		*gbă*	*gúwo*
	we	will	buy	palm-kernel oil		2000	10 [cowries]

3.	*egàn*		*dan*	*na*		*egàn*		*dan*	*na*
	word		is	*dem.*		word		is	*dem.*

This is the word, this is the word.

4.	*egàn*		*man*	*dùngùrù*	*cèki*
	word		also	lute	coarse-ground flour

5.	*cèki*	*man*	*cèki*	*cènkaʃa*
	flour	also	flour	rice

6.	*cènkaʃa*		*cènkaʃa*		*yàwó*
	rice		rice		wife

7. *yàwŏ*   *ma*   *yàwŏ*   *málàmi*
   wife   also   wife   Imam

8. *málàmi*   *málàmi*   *Sòkó*
   Imam   Imam   God

9. *Sòkó* *ma*   *Sòkó*   *ànăbi*
   God   also   God   prophet

B.

10. *Wóní*   *fangwa*   *dan*   *'do*
    Single cowry   dropped out of [my] hand   enter granary

11. *ácìngá*   *wun*   *'à*   *wú*   *lo*   *Ràba*
    Thus   she   will   show   go   Raba
    Thus she'll show the way to Raba.

12. *Rába*   *ci*   *ka*   *kòtò*   *be*   *dzùn*
    Raba   and   bent   round   and   came out

13. *ebó ki bo*   *ka*   *kòtò*   *be*   *dzùn?*
    Why   [did it] bend   round   and   come out

C.

14. *ebó*   *na*   *le*   *tsutsu*   *yé*   *na*
    Because   dem.   saw   death   saw   dem.

15. *a*   *tsutsu*   *kin*   *láya*   *gútá*
    They   corpse   sew   charm   three
    They sewed three charms for the corpse.

16. *anírí*   *dan*   *'vo*   *wòcè*   *o*
    one   inside   gourd   trade   euph.

17. *'bó*   *wun*   *'à*   *kún*   *'nya*   *wun*   *gí'lè*
    So that   she   will   sell   thing   she   profits

18. *aní*   *dan*   *zogùn*   *tukpa*   *o*
    One   inside   mat   corner [ear]   euph.

19. *'bó*   *wun*   *'à*   *lele*   *sa'nle*
    So that   she   will   sleep   [and] wake up

20. *ani*   *dan*   *dòkò*   *nyagbàn*
    one   inside   horse   chest

21. *ebó*   *wun*   *'à*   *cékà*   *u*   *zhín*   *'mì*
    So that   it   will   wander   it   return   compound
    So that if it wanders it will return home.

D.

22. *áníngá*   *èjin*   *sála*   *Mákàmbo*
    Thus   they do   prayer   at Mecca

23. *Ala   Akbar!*
Reponse changes to *Koro!*

E.

24. *ǹdági*   *lo*   *'kun*   *na*
    Ndagi   went   war   *dem.*

25. *ǹdági*   *de*   *'zà*   *won*   *à*
    Ndagi   get   person   catch   not

26. *ǹdági*   *yí*   *'à*   *won*   *Zùnmà*
    Ndagi   still   will   catch Zunma

27. *Zùnmà*   *na*   *kún*   *'ci*   *na*
    Zunma   *dem.*   sell   yam   *dem.*

D.

28. *kókóta*   *jin*   *sála*
    Lice   do   prayer
(The action of prayer is mimicked by bringing the hand to the face.)

29. *eshìgi*   *bà*   *àdŭwa*
    Dogs   to   prayer

F.

30. *caŋ, caŋ!*   *kóròbǎ*   *caŋ, caŋ!*   *kóròbǎ*
    caŋ caŋ!   tin can   caŋ caŋ!   tin can

G.

31. *yi*   *dìn*   *'gbà*   *yi*   *dìn*   *kácìn*   *à*
    we   stretch   legs   we   stretch   otherwise   not
    èɡbà   *yí*   *tun*   *à*
    legs   will   reach   not
Repeated several times.

     Despite the non-sequiturs and curious ideas, the text is in no sense improvised. Several versions were recorded in different places, all nearly identical. Occasionally, words of similar meaning and length can be substituted. For example, in one version *kpatsùn* 'neck' was substituted for *nyagbàn* 'chest' in line 20. However, the text is essentially fixed.

There seem to be four main sections of the song. In Section A the lines are linked by a type of enjambment, where the last principal idea of the line becomes the subject of the next line. From line 5 onwards the subject of the line is repeated twice. Section B (lines 10–13) is hard to interpret, even for a Nupe speaker. Raba is usually the name of a place, the former capital of Nupe, but here it is explained as personal name. Section C is more coherent and seems to recount the experience of young girls marketing. Three charms are made (perhaps from a corpse?). One is placed in the gourd of the girl going to market so that she will be successful in trading. One is placed under the corner of her sleeping-mat so that she will wake up early to go to the market. The final one is placed around the neck of the horse, so that it does not wander off in the night.

The next section, D (lines 22, 23, 28, 29) is broken in the middle by a quite different narrative. This is the only part of the song where another physical action is mimicked, as the players represent prayer by bringing their hands to their face. The references to lice and dogs praying were seen by the girls as humorous rather than in any way irreligious. Section E (lines 24–27) is interpolated in D and relates to Ndagi and Zunma. The single line 30 in Section F refers to the noise made by a tin can as it drops to the ground. Finally, G, Line 31 describes the action of the song and concludes it.

The fragments that have been joined together to accompany this singing-game must originally have formed more coherent texts, perhaps as part of adult songs or as songs integral to folk-tale. However, they have been compounded in slightly garbled form (especially Section B) to generate a rhythmic song-text of an appropriate length to accompany the game.

5. Conclusion

This paper can only provide a glimpse of the rich literature of Nupe children's songs and singing games that still await recording and transcription. The material in this paper all derives from the central area of Nupe: Bida and the surrounding villages. However, Nupe culture shows considerable regional variation and it is likely that the same will be true for children's repertoires.   •

Even on the basis of the short samples given here it would be hard to maintain a wholly functionalist perspective on the texts. The children themselves are unable to interpret the texts in any consistent way, and the texts often seem to merge fragments of originally different songs. Some, such as "pull on the vine" are no more than descriptive of the game. Other texts function to build a rhythmic accompaniment to games and to reflect the strange fragmented world in which children live. Children's songs are

more than pieces of arcane folklore, but considerably less than a comprehensive educational programme.

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