

Documenting oral literature genres in Nigeria: the example of Nupe

Documenting Oral Traditions in the Non-Western World

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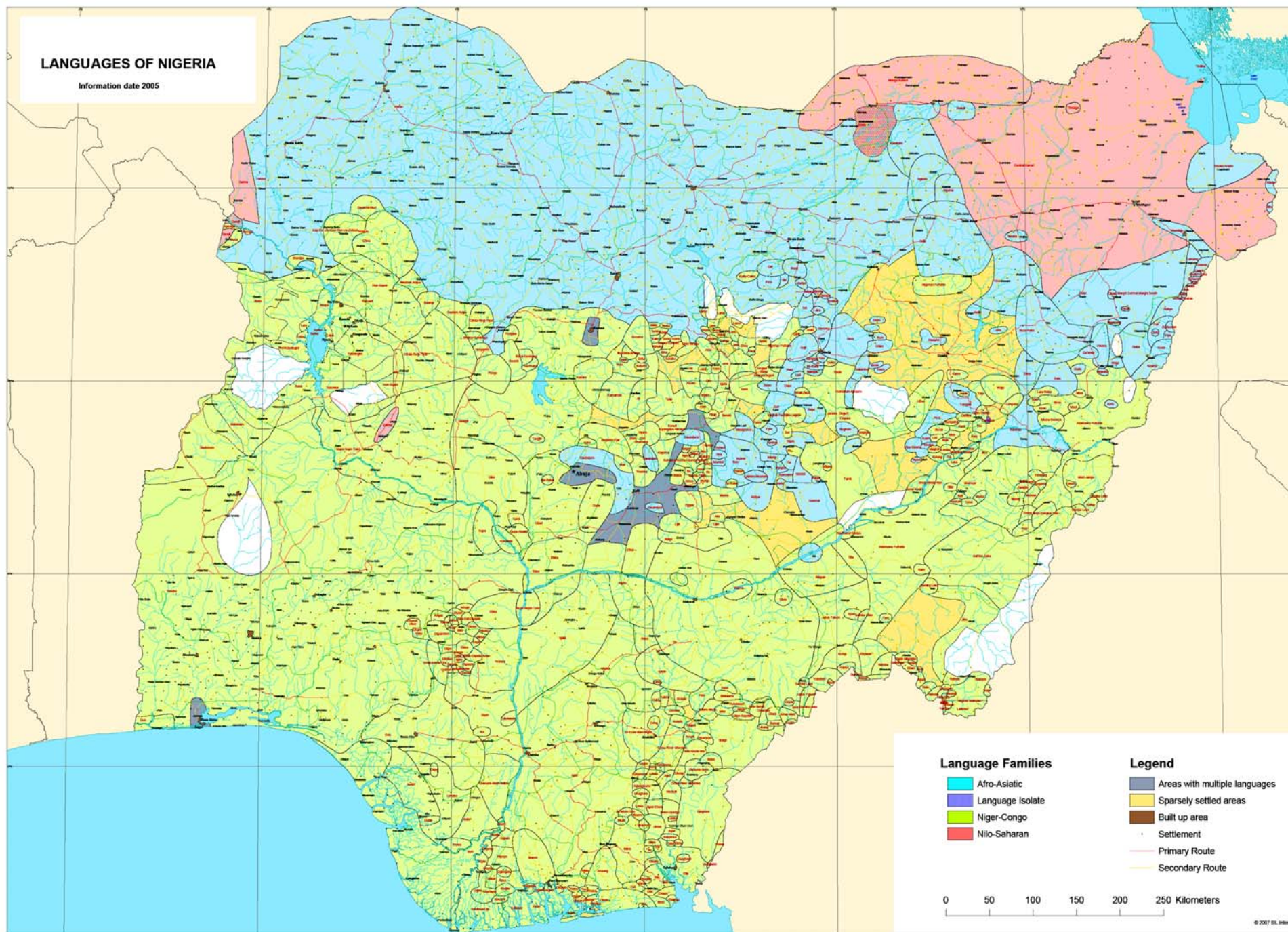
Kay Williamson Educational Foundation

Background to Nigeria I

- There are some 550 languages in Nigeria, i.e. nearly 30% of all those in Africa. Cf. Atlas of Nigerian languages online
- Of these, at least 200 are severely endangered
- Despite its vast university system (60+ tertiary institutions) and oil wealth, the description and documentation of minority (and even major languages) is both scanty and often very shoddy
- Ethnomusicological studies are nearly non-existent
- Archiving facilities are rarely present and conditions for audiovisual materials unacceptable
- Internet access (or even electricity) not present except in larger settlements

LANGUAGES OF NIGERIA

Information date 2005



Background to Nigeria II

- Despite this, there is unparalleled enthusiasm at the community level for language development (in parallel with cultural development)
- This is largely unexploited by the academic community; despite the immense amount of concerned brow-furrowing in relation to endangered languages
- However, religious groups are actively involved
- Outside any structured encouragement, there has been an intriguing growth of commercial and community videos using minority languages



Background to Nigeria III

- However, the rise of fundamentalist Islam represents a major threat to musical and oral genres in the northern parts of the country
- The Kanuri and the Hausa had long, complex 'beggar's epics' which were recited by travelling storytellers who went from market to market in the dry season
- The texts were highly transgressive and manifestly unislamic and the performers have been suppressed by the authorities. They have never been properly documented or published
- A general anti-music ethos has been adopted in many areas of the north, destroying a rich repertoire.
- Though strangely this does not apply to imitations of songs from Indian musicals

Background to Nigeria IV

- There is no shortage of commercially published collections of folktales and proverbs. Without exception these tend to be travesties of the real thing, altering the text for moralising purposes
- Recent years have also seen the rise of publications (in Hausa and English) purporting to recount oral history. These are great for anthropologists but completely unreliable as historical texts as they are simply restructured to respond to current political exigencies and have no genuine text behind them

Background to Nupe I

- The Nupe are a Niger-Congo speaking people in west-Central Nigeria
- There probably a million speakers, so the language is not endangered
- They were made famous (to anthropologists) in a monograph by S.F. Nadel published in 1941 but researched in the early 1930s.
- This monograph, 'Black Byzantium' expressed rather well the complex religious and political system of Nupeland
- It used to be a fixture on anthropology reading lists, although not in recent times
- A mixture of British social anthropology and German ethnology

The Nupe-speaking area



Background to Nupe II

- The Nupe are Muslims, but they have a strong background of traditional religion, particularly in some villages, and a reputation for witchcraft among other Nigerian ethnic groups
- Traditionalists have tended to become Christians, and a marked rural Christian/urban Muslim opposition has developed in recent years
- In the 19th and early twentieth centuries, Nupe culture was strongly influenced by Hausa Muslim practice, but this has been waning in recent times
- These divisions are also strongly reflected in the genres of oral literature

Nupe language I

- Nupe is the most important language in a Volta-Niger subgroup called Nupoid, which also includes, Gbari, Gade and Ebira
- It is a highly tonal language with three level tones and numerous glides, making it appear similar to many SE Asian mainland languages
- Basic vocabulary consists almost entirely of short morphemes, CV and CVN, only distinguished by tone
- As a consequence, the tones of speech have a high functional load and thus affect strongly, for example, musical practice, such as song melodies and speech surrogates
- Nupe was written in Arabic script in the nineteenth century using the conventions of Hausa Ajami, but its tonal nature made this material (mostly poems) hard to read

Nupe language in Arabic script

[illegible]

TRANSLITERATION

**Bismi allahi arrahmani arrahimi salla allahu ala anabi
alkarim.**

1. Mi yá, mi èbe yèbo yà 'tsu na jin a ci àjin yi na.
Sòkó wòncín àzàkpe yà 'zà na gà kpa u yè na.
Jin a mà, jin a 'tí, kaye 'tsu na yi kágboóci na.
Alhamdu yèbo yi èjin o yà Tsóci na jin yi na.
Àsàlatù yesí bè 'yi nyi yà egi Amina na u mà na.
2. Sòkó yà yi 'tí, u yà yi 'gwa, to bìcì, yi èjin yèbo.
Etsu gá jin yeré gútwani fi nínmí nakà 'zà bo.
Abà Jiyá gá, Ye kpe ze ètá Nupe ci èjin yèbo?
Abū Bākārī egi Ànàsì ci èkóní, ci èjin yèbo.
Yesí bè 'yi nyi godèwa yà Tsóci na jin yi na.
3. Tsóci u jin anabawaži jin yà egi Mákàci.
Tsóci u jin màlāyíkazi jin yà egi Mákàci.
Tsóci u jin 'fè, u jin 'na, tò nuwọn yà egi Mákàci.
Tunçi Sòkó yi à gba o, Mahámádù egi Mákàci.
Yesí bè 'yi nyi yi èyi wun o, ezàkó na ba yi na.
4. Sòkó Tsóci yi èbà láfíyà na dókun na.
Sòkó Tsóci yi èbà 'nya, tò ràkun na à lá kàrà yi na.
Sòkó ga lwò eli yi mà, wo yà yi 'nya na yi èbà na.
Sòkó u lá yi lo Mákà, yi à da egi nyá egi Ámínà.
Mādinā tsá a èyi wun o, 'bà na a tú 'mì zì bo na.
5. Yi bà u 'bó Swalihu bo, wo yà yi ebó Sarijisu bo.
Yi bà u 'bó Lukmanu bo, wo yà yi ebó Zalikifulu bo.
Yi bà u 'bó Yunusa bo, wo yà yi ebó Sofuwanu bo.
Yi bà u 'bó Mahámádù bo, wo yà yi ebó Asábuhu
uzi bo.
Wo yà yi gwagá 'fo mi 'ku nyi, na ké yi gá bè ena
nyi na.

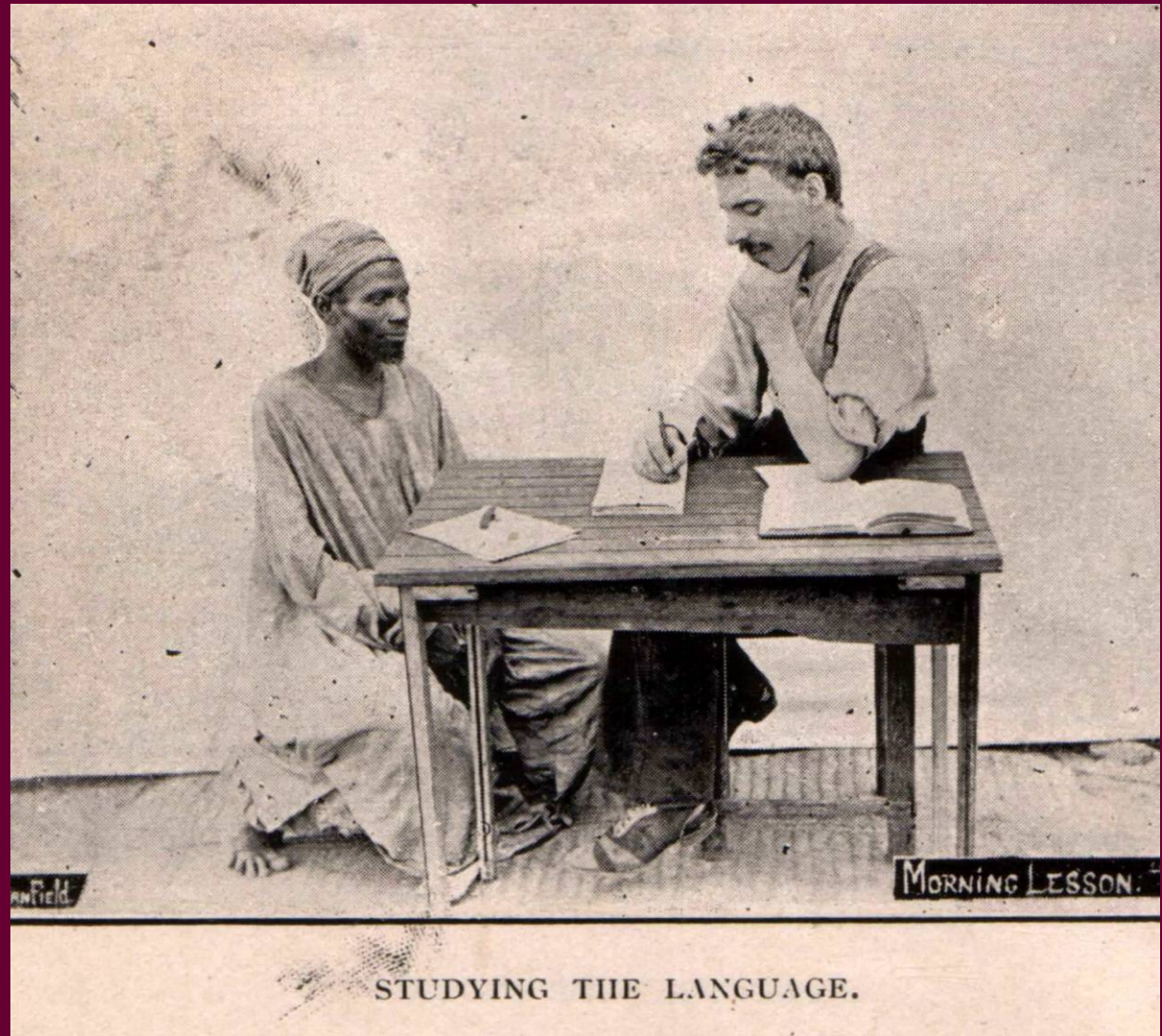
etc.

Nupe language II

- Nupe language was first studied by Bishop Crowther in the 1860s, but significant information was first gathered by Banfield, who was a missionary for the SUM from 1905 onwards.
- Banfield analysed the tone system almost completely correctly, which was highly unusual at that period, and produced a grammar (1915) and a dictionary (1914-1916) which still remain significant works of reference.

Nupe language III

- Banfield took some interest in Nupe oral literature, as can be seen by his collection of Nupe proverbs and the translation of Islamic poetry



Nupe language III

- However, Arabic script material is a highly specialised sub-genre and has almost disappeared today
- Before the first World War the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius also spent some time in Bida. Although he took a great interest in African *Marchen*, he only summarises or retells a few Nupe stories and left no text transcriptions
- S.F. Nadel also took a slight interest in Nupe song-texts (curious because he was by training a musicologist) and published a translation of a Nupe song. Nonetheless, he took no serious interest in oral literature
- There are some locally published collections of proverbs, but otherwise new material is very slight. Nupe 'poetry' has been published by individual Nupe, but it is entirely written in modern literary genres

Change in Nupe oral performance 1979-2008

- My own intensive period of fieldwork among the Nupe was 1979-1982 with periodic subsequent visits up to 2008
- During this period, the spread of recorded music and greater mobility, has led to a precipitous decline in, for example, storytelling by adults to children. My impression is also that the use of complex idioms and proverbs in speech is in decline, though this would be hard to prove.
- Masquerading and the ritual speech associated with it is definitely in retreat
- However, what remains vibrant is anything associated with the traditional political system and the social hierarchy; indeed the growth in wealth due to oil in this period probably has given it a boost if anything
- Nupe nationalism and the sense of escaping the influence of Hausa culture has also grown as it has throughout the Middle Belt.

Nupe oral literature genres II

- A simple division in Nupe oral literature genres can be made between sung (or musically performed) and spoken, though this is not a division Nupe would make
- Roughly corresponding to our 'music' is the word *enyà*, which also means 'drum' and 'dance' (a not uncommon polysemy in African languages). Nupe also use the word *ení* 'song' for songs with standard texts
- This could be translated 'performance' except that all types of ritual performance, both Islamic chanting and songs associated with traditional religion would not fall in this category
- Importantly, also, instrumental performance is characterised as a type of speech because this is seen as the potential of instruments, to imitate speech tones and thus 'say' things.
- So when people hear drums, they ask 'What is it saying?' not 'What is the drummer playing?'

Nupe oral literature genres III

- Spoken genres, *gãgã`*, are as follows;
- Proverbs. These are usually known as *gãmăgà*, which also applies to 'story', 'allegory', 'idiom' and sometimes also 'riddle'.
- A typical Nupe proverb;
 - Giama gà ánikĩ, zũyě ásũ Sòkó
 - When a chameleon stumbles, God is put to shame
- The capacity to weave proverbs into oratory was traditionally seen as part of the quality of a good speaker, although this is becoming less so, as the proverbs themselves become more obscure.

Nupe oral literature genres IV

- Riddles. The usual term is *ècĩ*. Riddles were probably originally part of the currency of adult speech, but they seem to be confined to children today.
- A typical Nupe riddle is;
 - *nnǎ́kó fî kata tàkò o, enyî u bé dê*
 - Grandmother is sitting in the back of the room, but her hair is trailing outside
 - Answer: smoke

Nupe oral literature genres V

- Stories. Nupe have two types of story, folktales, *gàṁǎgà*, and historical narratives, *làbǎrì*, a word also meaning 'news' and borrowed from Hausa.
- The typical folktale involves the doings of animals, with tortoise, *duku*, and hare, *kárigì*, typical protagonists. Stories are interspersed with short songs, and usually begin with a call and response with the audience.
- Nupe historical traditions are usually told in quite an informal way, and concern the culture hero of the Nupe, Tsoede, or Edegi, or else the founding of the modern Muslim kingdoms by Mallam Dendo. Banfield's 'Story of Eti Abunu' may be the first Nupe narrative of this sort recorded
- These traditions are variable from one region to another and tend to reflect local traditions of authority. There are no formal oral historians to preserve the particular features of a narrative

Nupe musical literature genres I

- Nupe musical genres falling into the general category of *ení* can be divided into a significant number of subtypes;
 - *enyăko*. The most important type of performance socially, consisting of drummers with women singers and sometimes the flute *kpànsăńăgi*. These performances are usually for wealthy patrons, or even the Etsu Nupe and consist of praises, titles and other proverbial expressions. Most singers consider these texts 'traditional' but as Nadel pointed out in the 1930s, since they also include references to recent political events (such as the introduction of the motor-car) they must in fact be composed.

Nupe women singers photographed by Nadel in 1932 (?)



Nupe *enyãko* drummers performing for the
Etsu Nupe during the Sala parade



Nupe player
on the àlìgěta
shawm,
during a
Friday
performance
for the Etsu
Nupe



Nupe *dómba* ensemble playing devotional songs during the Ramadan period



Nupe *enyã dùṅgùrù* ensemble performing
praise songs for hunters



ángalè drum ensemble performing for weddings and other life-cycle ceremonies



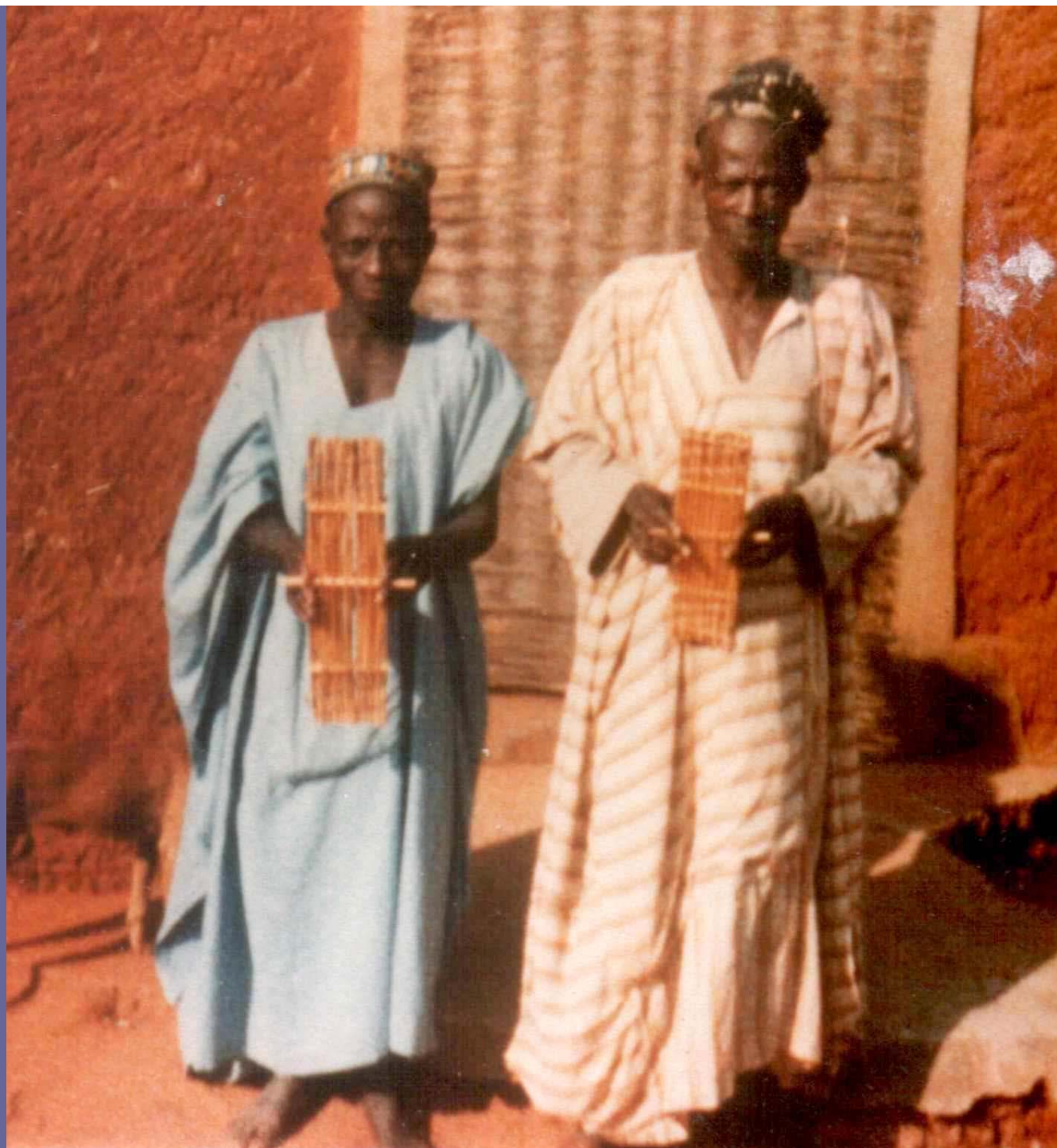
dzákó performance to encourage work during circulating agricultural labour



**Tomasi
Gana
performing
songs for
personal
amusement
on the
evogi lute**



Harvest
songs
perform
ed on
the *bísã*
raft-
zither



bínākũ transverse clarinet played during the sorghum harvest




Example of a praise name played on the bínākū clarinet



dòmbāshì

Rákiya

 = 126

A praise-title

A girl's name

[Played by M.Kolo, Patita, 1/3/80]

Nupe women performing the *epun* repertoire at a marriage



Nupe women dancing following a kuti sacrifice



The Ndako Gboya masquerade photographed by Frobenius (1911)



Dako Boea tanzt auf dem Marktplatz in Mofwa.

(Photographiert von Leo Frobenius.)

Threatened musical forms



THANKS

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