

# Oral literature genres of the Nupe of Central Nigeria



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## CURRENCY

The currency of Nigeria is the Naira (₦) which was divided into 100 kobo. By the time of the fieldwork reported in this paper, the kobo had almost fallen out of use. During the period 1979-1982, the Naira was officially valued at around ₦1.3 to the British Pound. Since then it has fallen dramatically and in early 2010 there were around ₦230 to the £.

## **1. Introduction: background to Nigeria**

Nigeria is by far the richest repository of oral traditions and culture in Africa, if only because some 500 languages are spoken there, i.e. nearly 30% of all those in Africa (Lewis 2009). Of these languages, at least 200 are severely endangered (Blench 1998). Existing documentation of these traditions is extremely weak, and shows no sign of improving. Indeed, despite the extensive university system in Nigeria (60 tertiary institutions) and oil wealth, the description and documentation of minority (and even major languages) is both scanty and often unreliable. Current ethnomusicological studies are nearly non-existent. Archiving facilities are rare and conditions for audiovisual materials unacceptable. There is no internet access (or even electricity) except in larger settlements, and power is highly unreliable.

Despite the discouraging situation in the universities, there is unparalleled enthusiasm at the community level for language development in conjunction with cultural development. This has passed largely unnoticed by the academic community, despite the amount of concerned brow-furrowing in relation to endangered languages. Religion is undoubtedly the dominant force in developing literacy; the primary motivation is to translate the bible into the many vernaculars. Islam has historically developed Arabic script versions of some languages, but this impetus has almost entirely died<sup>1</sup>. Islam is now about conversion, which is as much cultural as spiritual, and the shift to Hausa is the preferred transformation. The rise of fundamentalist Islam represents a major threat to musical and oral genres in the northern parts of the country. The Kanuri and Hausa had long, complex ‘beggar’s epics’ which were recited by travelling storytellers who went from market to market every dry season. The texts were highly transgressive and manifestly unislamic and the performers have been suppressed by the authorities. These epics have never been properly documented or published. A general anti-music ethos has been adopted in many Islamic areas of the north, causing a rich repertoire to decay. These prohibitions does not apply to imitations of songs from Indian musicals, at which the Hausa are highly proficient, suggesting that it is not the music itself but the transgressive nature of the texts which are causing the problem for Islamic hardliners.

There is no shortage of commercially published collections of folktales and proverbs in Nigeria. 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 of interest to anthropologists but completely unreliable as historical documents as they are simply restructured to respond to current political exigencies and have no genuine transcribed text behind them. Outside any encouragement by government or the churches, there has been a growth of commercial and community videos using minority languages. However, these are very much about the promotion of modernity; the language and music they use is designed to reject the rural world reflected in oral literature.

Time is short to capture the richness and diversity of oral literature in many communities, not because languages are necessarily disappearing but because the contexts of transmission are being lost. The spread of radio and television simply displaces story-telling, just as simplified versions of the language erode the complex rhetoric of proverbs and tropes which defined traditional oratory. This paper<sup>2</sup> provides an overview of the oral literature genres of the Nupe people of west-central Nigeria, as an example of the wealth of material that is largely going undocumented, and can be expected to disappear for most ethnolinguistic

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<sup>1</sup> Although, by some irony, it is having a minor revival in the hands of bible translators (see Warren 2009).

<sup>2</sup> An early version of this paper was first given as a Powerpoint at the workshop ‘Documenting Oral Traditions in the Non-Western World’ held in Leiden, August 27-29th 2009. I am grateful to Aone van Engelhoven & Maarten Kossmann for inviting me and to the Kay Williamson Educational Foundation for sponsoring my travel. Much of the data was collected in Nigeria 1979-1982 and I am grateful to the Nupe people, in particular Tomasi Gana and the people of Piciko village near Bida, for acting as my hosts during this period and introducing me to many of the genres described in this paper. The late Mrs. A. Oshodi, as well as acting as a patient language teacher, worked through numerous story texts with me, some of which are reproduced here in part. Fragments of the material here can also be found in a different form in my unpublished Ph.D. (Blench 1984). For many years I found the whole process of examining the Ph.D. so inimical to serious scholarship I found it difficult to write up this material for publication. Those who took part in this charade are now dead, and I hope this rather tardy essay makes some amends to the Nupe people for the failure to make my field data available before now.

groups. The intensive period of fieldwork among the Nupe on which this paper is based was between 1979-1982, with periodic subsequent visits up to 2010.

## **2. The Nupe people**

The Nupe are a Niger-Congo speaking people in West-Central Nigeria with probably about a million speakers. Figure 1 shows their location in Central Niger State, southwest of the capital, Minna. Nupe was also carried to the New World as a recognisable Nupe vocabulary (under the name Tapa, the Yoruba term) was recorded in Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century (Rodrigues 1932). The Nupe are first mentioned by the 16<sup>th</sup> century traveller Leo Africanus (1896) and then are referred to in passing in a variety of historical sources, including Baikie (1856), Burdon (1909), Burdo (1880), Clapperton (1829), Laird Macgregor & Oldfield (1832), Lander & Lander (1832), Mattei (1890), Simpson (1871), Temple (1922) and Vandeleur (1897).

**Figure 1. Nupe-speaking area of Central Nigeria**



The Nupe were made famous (to anthropologists) through a monograph, 'Black Byzantium', by S.F. Nadel, published in 1942 but researched in the 1930s. The title of this monograph expressed rather well the complex religious and political system of Nupeland and used to be a fixture on anthropology reading lists, although it has been banished in recent times. Nadel was trained in the Viennese school of ethnology (Salat 1983) but later switched intellectual traditions, adopting British social anthropology in the company of the first generation of British West Africanists such as Meyer-Fortes. His field notes<sup>3</sup>, preserved in the archives of the London School of Economics, reflect his background in German ethnology but by the time *Black Byzantium* was published, the transformation into a social anthropologist was complete. Nadel published a considerable amount on Nupe society (Nadel 1935a,b, 1937, 1938, 1940, 1942, 1949, 1954, 1964). Other important sources include Forde (1955) which is a review of all the existing publications on the Nupe area including a useful bibliography of administrative documents and unpublished manuscripts. Since this date, publications on Nupe have been rather scattered, but include Adeniyi (1972), Agaie (n.d.), Angulu (1965), anon (1957), Blench (1982, 1983, 1986), Hogben & Kirk-Greene (1966), Katcha (1978), Kohnert (1978, 1979, 1980), Macfie (1912), Macrow (1956), Mann et al. (2003), Perani (1977, 1979, 1980), Perani & Wolff (1999) and Stevens (1966, 1973).

The Nupe were converted to Islam at the end of the eighteenth century, but they have retained a strong background of traditional religion, particularly in certain villages, where a culture of masquerades remains powerful. Traditionalists have tended to become Christians, and a marked rural Christian/urban Muslim opposition has developed in recent years. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth centuries, Nupe culture was strongly influenced by Hausa Muslim practice, but this has been waning in recent times.

<sup>3</sup> The field notes were transcribed as part of an ESRC-funded project in the 1990s, and a pdf version can be downloaded at <http://www.rogerblench.info/Antropology%20data/Text/Nadel/Nadel%20opening%20page.htm> .

Nupe society is very hierarchical, with a great diversity of subtle social grades, which are marked by a complex greeting system expressed in proverbial terms. The rulers, or Etsus, were able to confer numerous titles, which went with social and financial obligations. The annual expression of this rather fluid hierarchy is the two Sallah processions, Id-el-Fitri and Id-el-Kebir, where individuals laying claim to social status parade through the Nupe capital, Bida. Wealthier individuals ride on horseback surrounded by retainers wearing livery and preceded by musicians, who declaim praises of their patron. The rhetoric is that this is 'traditional' which it is in the sense that such parades probably go back to the early nineteenth century. However, the actual participants vary from year to year, along with the numbers of retainers, and the musical performance that accompanies them. Retainers are hired in for the purposes of the Sallah parades, which in turn depends on the financial circumstances of the high status individuals. One of the consequences of the growth of oil wealth in Nigeria has been that money has flowed along rather unpredictable channels and low status individuals can suddenly become wealthy, whereas older and perhaps less well-connected traditional title-holding families can no longer call on resources and loyalties as in the past. However, the Nupe status hierarchies are such that it is difficult for the newly wealthy to resist entering the system of manifesting that wealth. They are awarded titles and engage with the parades by inventing liveries for hired retainers and borrowing in musicians to perform for them.

Despite this, the overall picture for many oral literature genres is bleak. During the period 1979-2010, 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, if anything, the growth in wealth due to oil in this period probably has boosted it. Nupe nationalism and the sense of escaping the influence of Hausa culture has also grown, as elsewhere in the Middle Belt (Blench in press).

### **3. The Nupe language**

Nupe is the most important language in a West Benue-Congo subgroup called Nupoid, which also includes Gbari, Gade and Ebira (Blench 1989). The Nupe language was first studied by Bishop Crowther during the Niger expedition in the 1860s (Crowther 1842, 1864), and a first reader in the Nupe language was published by the Church Missionary Society (Johnson 1882). Hair (1976) includes a reference list of all the early primers and other attempts to write the Nupe language. Koelle (1854) was the first scholar to publish comparative wordlists of Nupe dialects. These early attempts to write the language were had only limited success due to a failure to understand the role of tone and vowel nasalisation. A major advance was marked by the work of Alexander Woods Banfield, who was a missionary for the SUM from 1901 onwards<sup>4</sup>. Banfield analysed the tone system almost completely correctly, highly unusually for the period, and produced a grammar (Banfield & Macintyre 1915) and a dictionary (Banfield 1914, 1916) which remain significant works of reference. Westermann (1927) was probably the first linguist to place Nupe within the framework of the Niger-Congo languages. Modern linguistic work on Nupe has been conducted by Madugu (1970, 1971, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1983/4, 1986, 1987), Smith (1964, 1967a,b, 1969a,b, 1970, 1971, 1980), Hyman (1970a & b, 1972, 1973), Harms (1973) and Chumbow & Ejimatswa (1987). As transcriptions of Nupe texts given later in this paper, the following summarises the phonology and tones of Nupe. Nupe has borrowed extensively from Hausa, and where Hausa loanwords have been identified they are marked following the transcription in Abraham (1962).

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<sup>4</sup> Banfield was a fairly remarkable observer for a missionary at that period and Fuller (2001) has published a useful biographical sketch.

## Consonants

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Alveo-palatal	Palatal	Velar	Labial-velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d			k g	kp gb	
Nasal	m		n					
Fricative		f v	s z	[ʃ] [ʒ]	c			h
			ts dz					
Trill			r					
Approximant					y		w	
Lateral			l					

Generally speaking,  $s \sim ʃ$  and  $z \sim ʒ$  are not contrastive, with [s], [z] before back vowels and [ʃ], [ʒ] before front vowels. However, Smith (1967a:158) gives some rare examples of contrast, both in partly assimilated loan-words and as a result of regular reduplication processes in the language. In the Banfield orthography, [ʃ] and [ʒ] were marked with subdots, thus  $\dot{s}$  and  $\dot{z}$ . Although they are theoretically predictable, there has been strong local resistance to dropping these indications and the usual solution, adopted here, is to represent them with ‘sh’ and zh’.

## Vowels

There are five vowels;

	Front	Central	Back
<b>Close</b>	i		u
<b>Close-Mid</b>	e		o
<b>Open</b>		a	

Banfield’s original orthography uses two additional symbols for vowels,  $\tilde{a}$  and  $\tilde{o}$ , which seem to conflate nasalisation and a mishearing of vowel quality. There are three nasalised vowels;

	Front	Central	Back
<b>Close</b>	$\tilde{i}$		$\tilde{u}$
<b>Open</b>		$\tilde{a}$	

Representation of these three vowels was not entirely consistent in Banfield, since the close vowels were represented as V + n and the central vowel as  $\tilde{a}$ . Nupe does permit sequences of V plus syllabic nasal, for example *kīn* ‘ground’, where the vowel is not nasalised.

## Tones

Like most Nigerian languages, Nupe is a tone language and every vowel can have one of five possible tones. There are three level tones and two glides, rising and falling. The glide tones are rare but do occur in isolation on some words which indicates that they must be treated as separate tonemes. The tones are indicated as follows;

High	´
Mid	Unmarked
Low	`
Rising	ˆ
Falling	˘

The basic vocabulary consists almost entirely of short morphemes, CV and CVN, only distinguished by tone. As a consequence, the speech tones have a high functional load and thus strongly affect musical practice,

since song melodies tend to follow syllabic tone. Speech surrogates, such as drumming and flute-playing in order to utter proverbs and praises, are essential to the maintenance of Nupe power structures. These mechanisms only work if the great majority of hearers can rapidly decode the utterances of musical instruments, showing that the correspondence between the tone system of the language and its musical realisation is extremely close. Nupe written without tone marking is thus very difficult to understand. Nupe was written in Arabic script in the nineteenth century using the conventions of Hausa Ajami (see §4.), but its tonal nature made this material (mostly poems) hard to read. The early bible translations by Banfield were tone-marked, but this has been dropped in more recent religious literature. As a result, readers have to spend time understanding the text before they can read it effectively.

#### **4. Written forms of Nupe literature genres**

##### **4.1 Arabic script literature**

Islam first crossed the Sahara around a thousand years ago, and with it a knowledge of Arabic script. Although many learned scholars wrote directly in Arabic, from at least the eighteenth century, attempts were made to write local vernaculars in an adapted version of the script (Warren-Rothlin 2009). The most well-known of these is the أعجمي *a'jamī* script, an adaptation of Arabic to write Hausa and Kanuri. Arabic is not well-adapted to African tone-languages, due to a lack of appropriate diacritics, but as with many inadequate orthographies, if the motivation is strong enough, individuals can learn to read and write. One of the languages adapted to the *a'jamī* script was Nupe. The origins of Nupe literary materials in Arabic script are not clearly dated but are presumed to be the middle of the nineteenth century when Hausa influence from the kingdoms further north was at its height. Apart from moral guidance texts, which probably had no oral counterpart, a number of devotional poems survive, which were probably originally chanted. Figure 2 shows such a poem composed in the late nineteenth century and copied out and reproduced in the frontispiece to Banfield & Mactinyre (1915).



Figure 2. Nupe poem in Arabic script

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ صَلَّوْا عَلَى النَّبِيِّ الْكَرِيمِ  
 حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ صَفْوَةٌ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْبَيْتِ  
 جَامِدٌ قَوْمٌ كَانُوا قَوْمًا لَا تَقْدِرُ عَلَيْهِمْ رَجَائِي قِيَامًا  
 أَصْلَاقٌ فَتَقْشِرُ عَنِّي وَاعْرِضْ لِي  
 صَفْوَةٌ مِنْ عَدُوِّكُمْ وَرَحِيمَةٌ مِنْكُمْ عَدُوٌّ لِي يَتَنَكَّرُ بَيْنَهُمْ  
 أَتَيْتُكُمْ بِمَنْ تَتَّقُونَ وَرَحِيمَتِي أَمَّا أَنْتُمْ فَيَكُونُوا لَكُمْ  
 قِيَامٌ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ  
 قِيَامٌ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ  
 قِيَامٌ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ  
 قِيَامٌ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ  
 قِيَامٌ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ  
 قِيَامٌ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ  
 قِيَامٌ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ  
 قِيَامٌ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَيَّاكُمْ يَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ

Source: Banfield & Mactinyre (1915)

The authors also give a transcription and translation of the text. This material is a highly specialised sub-genre and has almost disappeared today, along with the use of Ajami script among the Nupe.

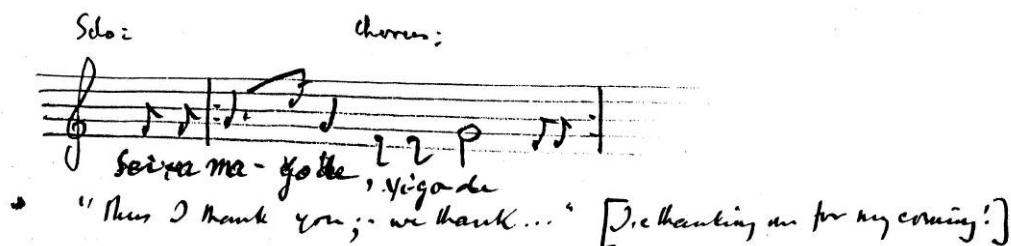
#### 4.2 Roman script literature

The first records of Nupe oral literature were taken before the First World War by the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1913) who spent some time in Bida. Although Frobenius later took a great interest in African *Marchen*, he only summarises or retells a few Nupe stories and left no text transcriptions. The missionary A.W. Banfield began learning Nupe soon after reaching the Nupe area in 1901 (Photo 2), only a short time after the area was brought under British rule. His dictionary is a rich source of Nupe idioms and expressions and he also appended a list of Nupe proverbs to his 1915 grammar. His photographic publication (Banfield 1905) is the first visual record of Nupe life and includes some precious photographs of ceremonies and performances that are no longer extant.

The anthropologist S.F. Nadel also took a slight interest in Nupe song-texts (curious because he was by training a musicologist) and published a single translation of a Nupe song (Nadel 1942). Some scattered musical transcriptions occur in Nadel's field notes. Figure 3 shows a short call and response melody and text and Figure 4 the melody of a song in the Kakanda language<sup>5</sup> with Nadel's notes on the words. Nonetheless, he took no serious interest in oral literature.

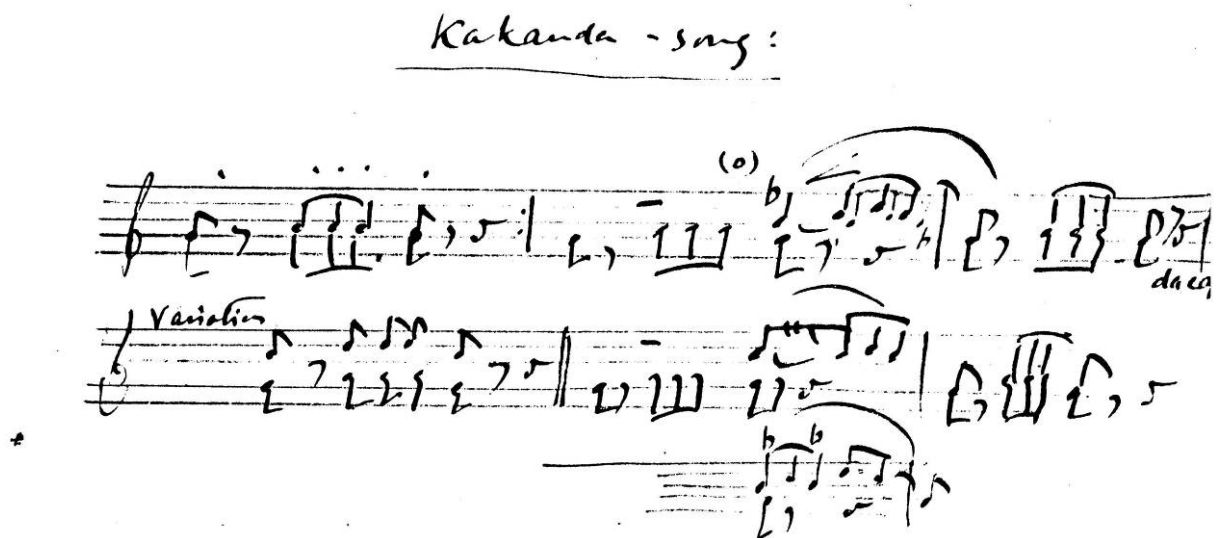
<sup>5</sup> Kakanda is a language related to Nupe but not mutually intelligible with it spoken along the Niger SE of Nupeland. As an indication of the slow pace of research in Nigeria, Kakanda remains still virtually undescribed.

Figure 3. Nupe song refrain recorded by S.F. Nadel



Source: Nadel field notebooks

Figure 4. Kakanda song melody recorded by S.F. Nadel



The text (if it is the original word text, apparently nonsensical words, just giving rhythm indicating the particular sounds, e.g. re, re-meme, re - re, re-meme, re...  
(o) This legato phrase seems to have a real word-text.

Source: Nadel field notebooks

Photo 1. Lisbeth Nadel recording in the field in 1936

Curiously enough, Nadel's wife, Lisbeth, seems to have been responsible for making some field recordings as Photo 1 shows. Copies of these recordings are lodged with the Museum der Volkskunde in Berlin. She later published a short paper on the raft-zither and its construction (Lisbeth Nadel 1937).

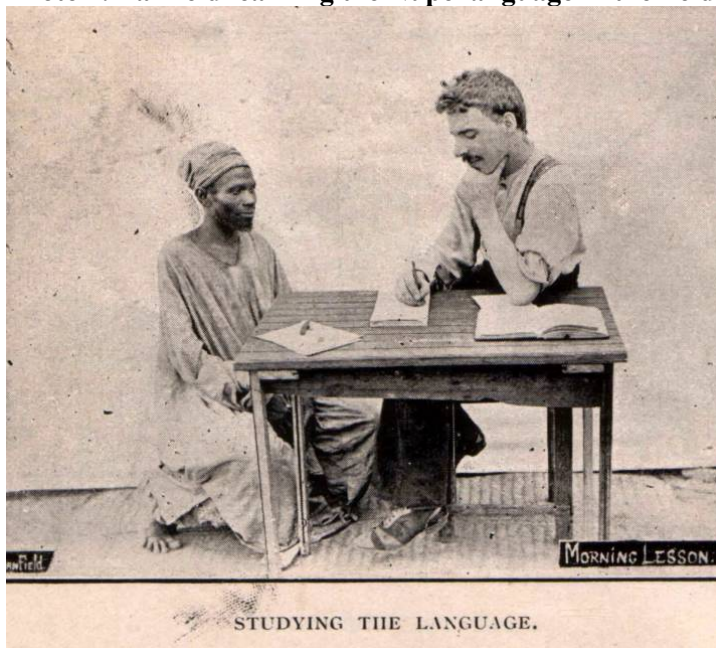
Since this period there have been some locally published collections of proverbs, but otherwise new material is very slight. Nupe 'poetry' has been published by individual Nupe, but it is entirely written in modern literary genres. It is interesting that such a lively culture has been so



Source: S.F. Nadel field photo

little documented by its speakers. One possible for this absence is the proximity of Hausa; many elite Nupe speak Hausa and if they feel the need to read and write they seem to choose the more prestigious Hausa, which also represents Islamic culture.

**Photo 2. Banfield learning the Nupe language in the field**



Source: Banfield (1905)

## **5. Nupe oral literature genres**

### **5.1 General**

Needless to say, the Nupe do not group their oral literature genres with any common term and would not see any connection between historical narratives recounted by adults and tongue-twisters swapped between children. Proverbs, riddles and short folktales are all grouped under one term, despite their obvious differences. For descriptive purposes, a practical division in Nupe oral literature genres can be made between sung (or musically performed) and spoken performances. However, because of the importance of speech-surrogates ('talking' drums etc.) this is not a distinction Nupe themselves would make.

### **5.2 Musical genres**

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 perhaps be translated 'performance' but all types of ritual performance, both Islamic chanting and songs associated with traditional religion, would be excluded from this category. Importantly, instrumental performance is characterised as a type of speech since instruments can imitate speech tones and thus 'say' things. So when people hear drums, they ask 'What is it saying?' not 'What is the drummer playing?'. Descriptions of the working of these speech-surrogate systems can be found in Schneider (1952), Armstrong (1955) and Sebeok & Sebeok (1976).

## Roger Blench Nupe oral literature genres Circulated for comment

The following sections describe all the major types of musical performance found among the Nupe, with a description of their political and social context. Excluded are children's songs, which are described in §6.

**àligěta**. (< H. àlgaità). A double-reed shawm of North African origin, brought to Nupe in the wake of the Fulani conquest in the nineteenth century. A typical **àligěta** is 50-70 cm. long, with four fingerholes, and occasionally a thumb-hole also, this last possibly introduced recently by analogy with European wind instruments. Like the **kǎnǎngǔ** hourglass-drums it is played in the processions at Sala. Unlike other Muslim courts in Northern Nigeria, the **àligěta** is not a royal instrument, and is played for prominent aristocratic families in Bida as a measure of their status. Although the **àligěta** is occasionally heard in Lapai, it has never achieved the widespread distribution it enjoys among the Tiv, for example. This may be because Hausa players of the instrument do not perform the speech-surrogate praises in Nupe that have ensured the survival of the **kpànsǎnǎgi** flute, an instrument of similar melodic capabilities.

Photo 3. *Àligěta* player, Bida 1981



Source: Author photo

**àngalé** is an ensemble of drummers and singers popular among the Nupe to accompany celebratory dances. In 1979-82, two performing groups were working in central Nupe, one based in Kuci, south of Bida, the other in a village near Kutigi; a third group, based in Doko, seems to have disbanded in the 1970s'. The relative economic success of **àngalé** is indicated by the fact that both groups have their own minibus to bring the dancers and singers to the place where they perform. According to the leader of the group based in Kuci **àngalé** was originally 'invented' in 1928 in Lokoja, among the Nupe Tako,. It was brought up the river shortly afterwards and enjoyed a great period of popularity in the Bida area in the 1950's and 1960's as a rural dance form. It is still played in this way in the areas east of Bida, among the Dibo, where ensembles are found in every small cluster of villages. As the principal drums are made from large, cylindrical kerosene tins it presumably had the advantage of cheapness as well as being 'exotic'.

The core of the **àngalé** drum-ensemble consists of three or four drums known as **gàlé**, consisting of empty, cylindrical kerosene-tins with one end removed (Photo 4). A single skin is placed over the open end, and laces pass from the skin to the base of the tin, where they are looped around an iron ring on the closed base of the drum. These drums are ca. 60 cm. tall and 30 cm. in diameter and they are made in sets of three. The player will arrange them in a semi-circle before him and beat them with a pair of straight wooden sticks, or else with his hand and a single stick. On his lap he normally has a small drum, **enyà daba**, of the same pattern as the larger cylindrical **enyà**, and this he strikes simultaneously. The three drum-heads are tuned to different pitches, but the intervals between these are not fixed. The only requirement is that the relative pitches be sufficiently distinct to allow of speech imitations. The leader, who plays the **àngalé** set, is accompanied by a varied ensemble of other drums. The most usual is the snared, cylindrical **enyà**, and there are at least three of these in the ensemble. These drums normally play simple accompanying rhythms, but occasionally, if the master-drummer, **Etsu'dza**, is present, he will leave the circle of **àngalé** drums and move around the crowd in search of patrons. The money he earns doing this, however, is added to the earnings of the group as a whole. Where other instruments are available, these are sometimes used, especially the **kǎnǎngǔ** hourglass-drum and the cornstalk notch-flute **kpànsǎnǎgi**.



Photo 4. *Àngàlé* ensemble in Bida, 1980



Source: Author photo

In central Nupe, *àngàlé* seems to have undergone a considerable transformation in the late 1960's and early 1970's. From being a secular dance form, appropriate to marriages, etc. it seems to have become incorporated into 'political' music, and professional women praise-singers used it to accompany their singing as a replacement for the more normal *enyàkó*. At this period a number of commercial recordings resulted from this collaboration. A response to this from the 'owners' of the *àngàlé* was to make their performances more elaborate, by using their female relatives as dancers and singers. The female *àngàlé* singers evolved a characteristic singing style, including melisma and tremolo on a single note and a hip-shaking dance style that produced a comprehensive spectacle. Influential Nupe did not approve these innovations, because *àngàlé* declined in status during the 1970s, and the senior women-singers ceased to use it as an accompaniment. The open eroticism of the dancing may have offended some of the influential Mallams, and it became consequently unfashionable to invite the *àngàlé* troupe to the higher level social occasions. Nevertheless, the professional performance an *àngàlé* group can deliver is useful to Local Governments, and they can be called for government functions, to honour visiting dignitaries, and for cultural festivals. The effect of this professionalization on other groups seems to have been to make them lose heart. The leaders of the defunct ensemble at Doko claimed that no-one would hire them when the Kuci group was available. They therefore lost interest, and the dances in the village reverted to the more conventional forms.

*Àngàlé* is an unusual ensemble in that it can meet the requirements of both urban and rural clienteles. During the dry season, when the majority of marriages in villages occur, the drummers are called to play for dancing, but the female singers and dancers do not perform with them. This is partly financial, for the cost to the villagers would be more than doubled, and they would therefore call a less expensive group. In the town, where more money is available, the singers appear and they are treated as normal *ningba*, and 'sprayed' with money in the usual way. The financial aspect of *àngàlé* is clearly important. If the full ensemble is called upon, there was a minimum payment of about 40 Naira in 1982, with a slight increase if the troupe has to come a long way, or the household calling them is of particularly high status. During the course of an

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all-night performance in town, they can probably expect to make another 50-200 Naira, depending on the relative wealth of the guests. The leader of the ensemble retains about half this for maintenance and expenses. The rest is distributed, according to the seniority of those participating. Any money directly offered to the female lead singer in respect of her performance, is hers to keep and distribute among the women who perform. When the **àngàlé** group plays in a village, it can expect a guaranteed payment of about 25 Naira, with additional earnings of 20-50 Naira. This constituted a respectable income by Nupe standards, and the **àngàlé** ensemble probably worked one night in two in the dry seasons of 1980 and 1981. However, this means that the performers cannot work so effectively on their farms, and they must thus depend more heavily on food bought for cash in the market. Both men and women are expected to wear expensive, embroidered gowns and robes, and this adds to the total outlay. The work is exhausting, since they usually played all night (from ca. 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. the following morning), with only limited breaks.

**Bàbò** is a generic term for all types of the bottle-gourd, *Lagenaria siceraria*, and refers specifically to a rattle made from it. This is a large, empty gourd, with a loose network of string and beads covering the exterior surface, which rattles when shaken. An average instrument will be 30 cm. long and the bulb 15 cm. in diameter. When used by men it has a strong association with the ensembles used for masquerades and other ceremonies, for example **Gūnu**. The rattles are normally used in pairs, and serve to lead the rhythm changes that mark different sections of the dances. The players normally sit on the ground and, unusually, may beat the open mouth of the gourd against the earth.

This rattle is now principally used by women in church services, probably under influence from Yoruba practice. However, women formerly used such rattles to accompany songs for sacrifices (**kútí**). Photo 5 shows a unique image taken from Banfield's photographic essay of women accompanying the performance of a sacrifice with the gourd-rattle. Banfield (1905:26) rather innocently records the following dialogue with the performers, who were clearly several sheets to the wind at the time.

‘After I had taken it, I turned to the woman in white in the centre of the picture, and said,

“Don’t you know this kind of business is not pleasing to God? God don’t [sic] like you to worship a Kuti”.

“O but he does,” was her answer.

But I went on to show her that they were not doing it so that God might forgive their sins, but only as a pleasure to themselves.

“Well,” said she, “our mothers have always done what we are doing, and they had health, and peace, and everything good, and what was good enough for our mothers is good enough for me”.

“Yes, but” I said, “God was not pleased with your mother either, and He has sent us to tell you, that if you will leave this alone and ask him to forgive you, He will.”

“Well,” she said, “you have said that it doesn’t please God, but what if it don’t, it pleases the devil, and it pleases us, so we will keep going.”

A century on, there is every reason to think that the leader of a women’s’ group might give a rather similar response to the importunate questioner.



Photo 5. Women playing the *bàbò* gourd rattle for a sacrifice



Source: Banfield (1905)

A similar instrument is used by women in churches today, to accompany hymn-singing, a practice borrowed from the Yoruba. Women's gourd-rattles are smaller than men's instruments, and the rattling beads are gaudily coloured. Although morphologically identical, this instrument is called by the Yoruba name, *šekere*, and is not regarded as 'the same', as it has no associations with traditional religion when used in this way.

**bínakù** is a short transverse clarinet of a type common in savannah West Africa. It is made from an internodal section of the narrow tip of a hollowed guinea-corn stalk with a single-beating reed upcut in the wall of the tube, naturally closed at the end nearest the player's mouth (Photo 6). In addition there is a fingerhole in the far end of the tube on the opposite side to the reed. The average length of these instruments is 30 cm. The lower end is left open and by closing this end with thumb and by opening or closing the fingerhole a series of four notes can be produced. The fourth note (both fingerhole and terminal hole open) is of poor quality and rarely used.

Photo 6. *Bínakù* cornstalk transverse clarinet



Source: Author collection

Transverse clarinets are made by unmarried boys and men when the guinea-corn has been harvested and the stalks are laid out to dry in the fields. The three notes that are used reproduce the speech-tones of the names of girls the boys wish to praise. Figure 5 shows a typical short phrase played on the **bínakù**, with a praise-name followed by the name of the girl. The tone-marks show that the melody follows the tonal contours fairly closely. Nonetheless, the inadequacy of this representation means that hearers must know roughly what the performer is trying to say, before they can interpret the melody.

Figure 5. Praising a girl with the *bínakù* clarinet



A praise-title

A girl's name

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

Source: Author transcription

The instrument is also used for communication between boys sent to scare animals from the crops. In former times, groups of boys used to walk around playing a set of instruments of different pitches, making a harvest music, and collecting small gifts from adults. Although once widely heard, even in the towns, this instrument is now confined to remote rural areas, having been largely replaced in the towns and their hinterland by imported plastic whistles. Playing this instrument is one of the activities of children that adults are apt to become nostalgic about, and it is the subject of a romantic song sung by adolescents.

**bisā** is a six-stringed raft-zither, used by men for speech imitation, the ‘speaking’ of proverbs, praises and songs. It is made from a raft of dried guinea-corn stalks, laid in parallel, and bound transversely with a heavy creeper, such as **kákancélà** (*Paulinia pinnata*). Raft-zithers of this type are common in Central Nigeria, but the Nupe instrument is unusual in having only six strings. Despite examining a number of specimens, I was unable to find any consistent relation between the tuning of the strings and concluded that so long as the pitches met the primary requirement, to distinguish effectively between the tone-heights of syllables in Nupe speech, no consistent tuning was necessary. Since the small number of strings is adequate for this purpose, there is presumably no need to increase their number.

The raft-zither is used by adult males for their own personal pleasure and seemed to be generally associated with the middle-aged and elderly. The instrument is still very much in use in the remoter rural areas, but has virtually disappeared in the urban areas. Lisbeth Nadel (1937:129) describes a 17-stringed raft-zither, apparently a member of the ensemble to accompany the **Gūnu** festival in Doko. I never saw an instrument of this type among the Nupe, and certainly none are in use among the Doko people today. As identical instruments are widespread among the Southern Gbari, and as Nadel indicates that both the ritual and the large pottery drums were brought from Gbari, this particular instrument was probably a ‘one-off’ import.

**Búmbúm** is an ideophone describing the sound of an upturned gourd, floating in a basin of water, struck with a stick. Common throughout the whole Niger-Kaduna area, it may be associated with ancient Northern influence. Unlike the Dibo and Gbari, the Nupe float only a single large calabash in a basin, thus producing a heavy bass note. As the gourd moves up and down in the water, the compression of the air trapped beneath it creates noticeable changes of pitch. It is struck either with the palms or with two straight wooden sticks. This instrument is played by women, to accompany the songs they sing when a daughter of their compound leaves to marry. It may be played alone or in conjunction with the struck gourd, **èpū**, or the struck basin, **gbángbámí**. To judge by the account in Agaie (n.d.) this was very popular in Bida in the 1950s, but seems now to have virtually disappeared from the town although it is still used extensively in the rural areas.

**Domba** is a type of Islamic chanting only performed during Ramadan. In rural areas, groups of men travel from place to place during this month, singing every night in a different village. A group usually consists of a single male soloist, and a chorus of four or more, all beating dismounted hoe-blades (**dùgbà**) with wooden sticks. The chorus continually repeats a short refrain, and the cantor praises important individuals present. Photo 7 shows a typically group recorded in Kolo in 1981. Sometimes the groups are said to sing historical



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texts about the rulers of Bida, but I was unable to find a group performing in this way. The performers in a **domba** group are normally rewarded with food and drink, and with gifts in kind, such as cloth and enamel bowls. The Islamic associations and the constitution of **domba** suggest that it was borrowed from the Hausa, as also the use of a dismounted hoe-blade. Nonetheless, there is no obvious etymology for this word, nor is there a tradition as to when and by what process, **domba** entered Nupe life. As the texts are in Nupe, it probably evolved or was adapted at the earliest period of contact with the spread of Islam further north.

**Photo 7. Domba group, Kolo, 1981**



Source: Author photo

In the town, the term **domba** applies to a different type of music, which is performed at night during Ramadan. This revolves around the need to wake people up early in the morning, so that they can eat before the light comes. In the old walled cities of North Africa and Hausaland, this function appears to have been fulfilled by the royal trumpet ensemble, but among the Nupe the role has now devolved to a quirky performer who is part of the court of the Etsu. This is the **Ebajiya**, a man with the right to wear a brass, horned cap and a multicoloured leather skirt. The **Ebajiya** wears a long leather skirt with strips of rag hanging from the waist-band. Sometimes there is an additional item of costume, a network shirt with pieces of broken calabash attached to it, that rattle as he dances. Apart from his role in **domba**, the **Ebajiya** also dances every year in the two Sala processions, and is rewarded by the Etsu for his services. The incumbent in 1979-1982, Mamadu Musa, did not sing, but instead one of his male relatives does so, though this is a matter of personal preference. The man who performed this role in the 1930s' is pictured by Nadel (1954: Ill. 29), who was told, erroneously, that this costume had only recently been created. An interview with the performer revealed that, according to tradition, the office was created under the Etsu Majiya (1875-1898) and has passed down in the patrilineal line since then. Although the costume, as Nadel (1954:216) suggests, seems to link it with the **elò** masquerade of the Mokwa area, the performer explicitly denied this.

The ensemble for this type of **domba** performance consists of a **kùle** iron bell, several **enyà** drums and one or two **bàbò** gourd-rattles. The presence of the **bàbò** is especially significant, as it constitutes a general link to traditional religion in Nupe culture, and suggests a now expunged magical aspect of the performance. Despite this, the performers all seemed to regard this type of **domba** merely as a way of making money; certainly their 'rounds' during Ramadan are strictly confined to wealthy households. The total income from this can be quite considerable, for if the ensemble works hard, in 1981 they could earn as much as a hundred Naira in a night. This money would be split between about eight performers, however, so the individual income generated is not exceptional.

**Dùngùrù** (perhaps < H. **zùngùruu** ‘tubular gourd’) is a type of lute played by Nupe hunters with a long, trough-shaped body, made from a block of wood, a hemi-ovoidal gourd, or occasionally, in modern times, from a large discarded tin can. The two strings, tuned 3-400 cents apart, are made of twisted leather strips. The table is of antelope skin, and the cylindrical neck passes through this skin. The instrument is played either with the fingers or with a leather plectrum. An unusual feature of some Nupe instruments is the presence of two ‘eyes’, pierced holes in the table of the instrument, covered by a spider-web. These cause a note plucked on the lute to vibrate, or ‘buzz’, on the same principle as the kazoo, and serve to make the sound more penetrating in a large ensemble.

The **dùngùrù** is used to accompany all ceremonies involving hunters. Another very similar instrument, the **evogi**, may replace it, but the presence of a lute seems to be indispensable. The lute is used both to create the rhythmic ostinati that underlie the refrains of hunters’ songs, and to ‘speak’ the praises of individual hunters. A typical ensemble for the mortuary ceremonies of a hunter might include a **dùngùrù**, two **bàbò** rattles, one **enyà dükù** pot drum, one **kùle** bell and another drum of one type or another. Photo 8 shows the ensemble from Patitegi, a village northwest of Bida. The leader, Usman Ndace, was an adolescent when the British came and could remember hunting a wide variety of large game. Even by 1979, almost all the large game had been wiped out from the Nupe area and the main animals hunted were cane-rats. Nonetheless, the heritage of hunters was still regarded with a great deal of respect, partly because many hunters were also reputed to be able to prepare charms and herbal medicines.

**Photo 8.** *Dùngùrù* ensemble performing for the death of a hunter, Patitegi, 1981



Source: Author photo

This type of ensemble has a habit of ‘drifting’ to other types of ceremonial music, and it was also used for the **màmà** masquerade, for the **vunshi** ceremony, and possibly the now-vanished **elò** masquerade. Players normally learn informally from other players, rather than from father to son. Formerly, many more hunters could play the lute, but the decline of the numbers of hunters had led to a thinning of the ranks. Players are not rewarded when they perform for ceremonies, except with beer, but if they play on request, then small sums are due. Nadel (1942:49) records that the low status of the instrument caused a player in Doko not to be awarded a title he might otherwise have had. I did not find this particular stereotype, although, as a group, hunters are an ambivalent category, as their activity in bringing meat is clearly desirable, yet their absences in the bush place them beyond the control of the community. Still existing in Bida, but very much attenuated, is a musical form **enyà dùngùrù**, a semi-professional ensemble of praise-singers who play at marriages and social occasions. It consists of two lutes, two gourd-rattles, and a drum, either **enyà** or **kānāngū**. The texts

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performed are praise-songs that draw on the same repertoire as the other types of praise-singing. The lutes used are so ill-constructed as to be almost non-functional, and in some performances the lutenist may confine himself to slapping the body of the instrument.

**Edzà** is a general term for drummer, heard more often in the villages than in the towns, it normally refers to players of the cylindrical two-headed drums, **enyà**, **sàlà** and **galo**. The variety of drums in town means that the term **enyànici** ('drum-beater') is more widely used. It is sometimes heard in the more general sense of 'instrumentalist' in forms such as **edzà bísà** 'zither-player'. Within a large village such as Doko, the instrumentalists are organised under an **Etsu'dzà** or 'chief drummer'. He keeps a number of drums in his own compound, and controls the musical accompaniment to events in the village. Since the distribution of payments for music is by seniority, he controls the status hierarchy among the drummers, and settles disputes about money. His control over players of other instruments is more limited, and while these men see themselves as the leaders of all the musicians, I found that players of the **kpànsánági** cornstalk-flute were likely to deny this and did act much more as independent economic units.

Becoming a drummer, as with other instruments, is very informal among the Nupe. All children play on imitation drums made from tin-cans and plastic sheets, and those who seem to show talent are selected by their peer group to beat on a basin to accompany singing. An individual who wants to learn will probably borrow an old drum from the **Etsu'dzà** and have it re-headed. After limited practice it is possible to join a performing group playing a repetitive rhythmic motif. After this, the development of a drummer's skills depend almost entirely on his own initiative. Some people are content to play simple accompaniments with a group all their lives, and thus earn a small but steady income. Others with initiative develop their knowledge of the appropriate proverbs and praises that are crucial to the repertoire of a master-drummer. The secret of advancement in the drum world is undoubtedly the co-operation of a knowledgeable **mábà** or praise-shouter. The co-ordination between the **mábà**, who amplifies the words of those in the audience who wish to make a public statement at a social occasion, and the drummer, who must instantly and comprehensibly translate his speech into drum-language, is important to achieve status in the world of drumming.

The ranks of drummers have special salutations, in order of seniority shown in Table 1;

**Table 1. Ranks and greetings for drummers**

Rank	Greeting
Somakàda	Fasàmāza
Sàsāniko	Kisàbuwa, Sàsā n de'nyā, Sàsā n go'nya
Etsu'dzà	Wàsandāmaci

These greetings have no obvious meaning in Nupe and are presumably borrowed from other languages. Only *Sàsā n de'nyā*! ('Shake it and take up the dance') is obviously appropriate to a drummer.

**ekú**. A percussion vessel consisting of the dried carapace of the common African land tortoise, **dùkú**, struck with a stick. Nadel refers to this as a component of ritual ensembles and it was used for **Gūnu** and occasionally other masquerades.

**elò**. A masquerade specific to the Mokwa area and described by Nadel (1954:214-6) and Stevens (1973: 40-3). As it had disappeared by 1970, any firm statements are a hostage to fortune but it seems unlikely that it was a Nupe-ised version of **gūgū** as Nadel implies (1954:216). Archive material in the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt-am-Main shows that **elò** was conducted along essentially similar lines in 1911, and at that period, the whole masquerade was conducted in Nupe. This contrasts with the **gūgū**, where even though the performers have been 'Nupe' for over a hundred years, they still sing the accompanying texts in a garbled form of Yoruba. According to both Nadel and Stevens the **elò** was essentially a non-serious masquerade with a submerged dramatic element. The ensemble of musical instruments seems to have included the **boborogi** vessel-clappers, the **gidigbo** percussion trough, the iron bell, **kùle**, and presumably drums as well. The ensemble recorded by Stevens in 1965 shows only double iron bells, the cylindrical **enyà** drum, and perhaps also a conical drum similar to **enyà donci** (q.v.).



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**eni** is the general term in Nupe for ‘song’, this refers both to specific songs and to the method of vocal production. This distinction is made because the general tendency in Nupe is to refer to both instruments and singers as ‘speaking’ rather than singing. Adults characterise songs by the chorus and the drum rhythm used to accompany them. Because the cantor may use whatever words are appropriate to the social occasion, only the refrain remains fixed, and Nupe often have shorthand conversational ‘titles’ for particular songs based on the texts. The refrains correspond to a specific drum rhythm, so that if the drummer initiates the song the audience/participants will be able to begin singing at once. Adult songs usually have proverbial refrains and avoid sequential texts.

**enígá** is a general term for ‘singer’, equivalent to **duwalú** or **enikóci**, derived from the word for ‘song’, used to refer to the high-status female praise-singers, whose guild-like organization dominates the musical life of urban Nupe. Their typical ensemble includes several women singers who repeat the refrain of individual songs and several male drummers, who play the **kàńàngǔ** hourglass drum. Photo 9 shows a typical praise-singer and her group photographed by Nadel in Bida in 1935. Such groups appeared almost identical during performances in 1979-1982<sup>6</sup> and are still very much in vogue up to the present.

**Photo 9. Woman praise-singer and her group in Bida, 1935**



Source: Nadel (1942)

Women praise-singers must be invited to any high-status occasion such as a marriage in a wealthy family, and are famed for their extensive repertoire. Many of their songs reflect on current events, although framed within the traditional discourse of praise-singing. When long-playing records first became available in Nigeria, these groups were the first to be recorded among the Nupe. Such high-status women are not usually married in the conventional sense, but used to contract ‘ghost’ marriages to other women, whose children would be incorporated into the household of the senior woman.

**enyà** is a general term for all types of drum and dance. The distinction between the two is normally made by the use of the reduplicated form **nyanyà** for ‘dance’. By extension, **enyà** has virtually the connotations of ‘performance event’. The ensemble named after the two-stringed lute, **dùngùrù** is known as **enyà dùngùrù** despite the fact that a performance does not include dancing, nor the ensemble a drum. The drum usually referred to by **enyà**, without qualification, is a two-headed cylindrical drum, with lapped heads, held in place by an H-shaped pattern of laces. Among the Nupe, this type of **enyà** has a number of different forms, according to the context of its use. For example **sala** is an exceptionally large type, used to accompany farm-

<sup>6</sup> Although it was possible to record these performances at public event such as marriages, I was never able to make a recording for analytic purposes because the expected payments were far in excess of the resources of an impoverished Ph.D. student in 1980.

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work, while **galo** is a small variety without a snare used in the ensembles of praise-singers. Needless to say, the boundaries between these types are fluid, and a **galo** can be manufactured by removing the snare from an ordinary drum, and **enyà** can be taken into the fields. Most **enyà** have a single snare across the playing head, and are beaten with a curved stick called **kòngǒ**. They are held by a loose strap from the shoulder so that they hang at the waist, and the playing head is nearly perpendicular to the ground. **Enyà** are very various in dimensions, ranging from the smallest type, used by the **angalè** drummers, only 20 x 20 cm, to large instruments used to accompany farm-work, 70 x 50 cm. They are wrapped in the multicoloured broadcloths woven by women in Bida, and groups that play regularly together may use the same design of cloth to create uniformity.

To perform speech-imitations effectively, it is necessary to ‘damp’ the head of the drum with the palm of the hand. The change of pitch thus created by increased pressure on the membrane permits pitch-distinctions appropriate to syllable-tone in Nupe. Master drummers, when seated, have a further technique of pressing on the lower skin with the palm of the hand. This alters the resonant capacity of the drum, and facilitates more subtle pitch-variations. Figure 6 shows how a master-drummer can beat a proverb on a two-headed drum, using the upper and lower skins and pressing the skin to produce a third contrastive timbre.

**Figure 6. Proverb beaten on the *enyà* drum**

Enã 'à kun kaba,      wuntsó 'à tá'mi u.

P P   L P   P P,      P U   L U   P   P.

Fire if enough maize, itself will tell it.

Key: U=Upper L=Lower P = ‘Pressed’ or ‘dead’ tone

[The sense of the proverb is that because maize kernels ‘pop’ in the fire they will automatically tell you when they are cooked]

**Enyà bàpa** is a type of singing by women that accompanies the pounding of potsherd floors. When a floor has been laid, it is sometimes covered in potsherds or small terracotta discs, set in a hard paste made from locust-pod extract and mud. When this is done, the surface must be beaten with wooden pounders known as **èpa**. Traditionally, whoever paid for the floor called the women and provided food and drink for them in return for their services. The song then accompanied the rhythmic pounding of the beaters. Photo 10 shows the earliest image of **enyà bàpa** being performed, captured by Benfield in 1905.

**Photo 10. Women performing *Enyà bàpa* in 1905**



Source: Banfield (1905)

**Enyà bàpa** has almost disappeared, both because the currently fashionable cement floors must be laid by individual professional male craftsmen, and because the women have become self-conscious about the songs. In floor-laying sessions where some of the older women began to sing, but the lack of choral response from the younger women effectively kills the performance. **Enyà bàpa** songs live on in a curious way, as part of a performance that the guild of women praise-singers puts on for any major social event, such as the visit of

the State Governor, or the Nupe cultural festivals begun in 1980. The women hold the floor-beaters and make gestures with them, while singing some of the choruses associated with **enyà bàpa**. The words, however, are now directed at the usual targets of praise-singers and the whole bears only a passing resemblance to the original inspiration.

**Enyà dükũ** is a large pot-drum used in a number of ritual ensembles throughout the Nupe area. **Enyà dükũ** was played for the now discontinued **Gũnu**, for the ‘Forty Days’ mortuary ceremony (in traditional villages), for **kuti màrà**, for the **Vunshi** ceremony and other types of traditional medicine preparation.

**Enyàkó** is a name meaning ‘the big drum’ or ‘the big dance’ normally used to refer to the type of praise-singing performed by the professional women singers. This is the most important performance socially, consisting of drummers with women singers and sometimes the flute **kpànsánági**. Performances are usually for wealthy patrons, or even the Etsu Nupe and the texts 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 social and political events (such as the introduction of the motor-car) they must in fact be composed. The typical ensemble consists of about five drummers playing snared **enyà** drums, with a player of the **kànàngũ** to lead them and a chorus of five or more male singers. **Enyàkó** is almost the only type regularly broadcast on Niger state radio and is used to represent Nupe music when it is required for television or a national cultural festival. The few records of Nupe music available commercially are of **enyàkó**, with the exception of the **angalè** referred to earlier, accompanied by women praise-singers. Within **enyàkó** there are further subdivisions of repertoire, for example, the **zaworo** referred to by Nadel (1942:302), or the **tsàngànági**, now extinct, where the cantor played a brass vessel-rattle.

**èpũ** is a musical genre accompanied by striking the convex surface of an upturned hemispherical calabash laid on a cloth as part of the musical accompaniment to marriage songs. The calabash is struck either with the palms or with a pair of short, straight sticks and laid on a folded cloth, to prevent it rattling against the ground. Players raise the calabash from the cloth rhythmically during the performance to change the resonant frequency of the instrument and provide a timbre contrast. This is one of the few instruments exclusively played by women, and fits into the same niche as **búmbúm** (q.v.).

**Èpũ** is typically performed when the girl to be married has been ‘captured’ and hennaed, and simulates grief for the impending separation from her home. The ensemble shown in Photo 11 is led by Mama Kolo from Patita and they perform for all the marriages in their own village, and also when they visit another village to accompany a girl who will be living away from home. The women’s chorus is informally composed, and may vary from one day to another.



Photo 11. *Èpũ* ensemble led by Mama Kolo, Patita, 1981



Source: Author photo

**Eyígi** is a cruciform wooden whistle used to ‘speak’ to the masquerades **gboya** and **màmà**, and direct them when they appear. Despite the different tone on the second syllable, this word is probably connected with **eyi** ‘guinea-corn’. A Nupe example was a conical wooden tube, open at the base, about 15 cm. tall, with two finger-holes opposite one another in the side-wall, which modulate the pitch. The mouthpiece was a simple circular embouchure, and the player blew across it like a panpipe. Non-initiates are not permitted to understand the phrases spoken on the **eyígi**.

**Gbángbámí** is the Nupe name for a large enamel basin. Introduced as a substitute for **èpũ** struck calabash, the basin is held by a kneeling player and beaten on the base with the palms. In some areas, small coins are also placed on the surface to rattle as it is struck.

**Gbángbárà** is the seed-pod of the horse-bean, *Canavalia ensiformis*, which grows on a vine on compound walls. When mature in December, it dries out and the seeds rattle inside the pod. These pods are used by adolescent girls as rattles to accompany songs sung on moonlit nights. An expert player will throw the rattle from hand to hand and slap it against various parts of her body to vary the rhythm. This instrument corresponds to the Hausa *bàrancakii*, and it may have spread from further North, as the vine is a cultivated plant. The **gbángbárà** has completely disappeared in the towns and their hinterland, even though moonlight singing continues, but it is still used in remoter rural areas.

**Gbàndò**. A wooden hourglass-drum, open at the base, with a single membrane, used only in the royal ensemble playing for the Etsu Nupe. Laces

Photo 12. *Gbàndò* player, Sallah procession, Bida 1981



Source: Author photo

pass from the head to a fibre ring looped around the exterior of the base. This ring is attached to the drum by smaller fibre loops that pass through small holes pierced in the drum wall. They are supported on the shoulder with a short strap, and beaten with the palms. These drums can only be made at the command of the Etsu Nupe, and apart from their unusual construction, they are bound around with the distinctive red livery of the court. In 1979-1982 there were twelve **gbàndò** drummers in the royal ensemble, and this expansion is almost certainly consequent on the oil wealth that had recently been entering Bida. In more constrained periods, the ensemble can be as low as six players. Recruitment to the ranks of the drummers is essentially by invitation, and this is normally extended to professional players of the **enyà**. Playing the **gbàndò** is an ensemble skill, since the innovative 'speaking' parts of the court ensemble are given to the more flexible **munugi**. The royal ensemble, apart from playing for the Etsu Nupe, where the players receive a salary, has the chance to earn additional income by playing for the marriages and naming-ceremonies of relatives of the royal family. In the dry season, players can hope to work at least one night in three, although the 'stripped-down' ensemble preferred for this sort of contract work, requires only two or three players of the **gbàndò** and thus there is some competition. Therefore, most players also continue working with the **enyà**, as this gives more flexible opportunities for a skilled player to receive more substantial rewards.

**Gìdigbo** is an instrument otherwise rare in Africa; a percussion-trough. It is made from a cylindrical block of wood hollowed out so as to leave two thin walls separated by a large rectangular mouth. Around each end are grooves that permit the suspension of the instrument from the bough of a tree. Traditionally, the instrument was played by the boys who were sent out to guard the crops against the depredations of monkeys. Sometimes the boys also danced to the sound of these instruments. By beating the lip and wall of the **gìdigbo** two tones can be heard and these are enough to tap out stock phrases in imitation of speech-rhythms, to tell the monkeys that the crops were not worth eating. Figure 7 shows one of these phrases, with the alternation of timbres on the **gìdigbo** corresponding to the tones in the proverbial phrase.

Figure 7. Gìdigbo percussion trough text



'zo nã a du nà, 'zo lukómbudu.

beans that they cook, beans smut.

'The beans they are are cooking are diseased'.

[Played by Ndagi Gana, Pici 1/3/80]

**Gūnu** was an important festival in the Nupe ceremonial calendar, described in detail by Nadel (1937 & 1954:80). A rehearsal of the ethnography of **Gūnu** would be out of place here, but it should be noted that it was also practised by all the neighbours of the Nupe, and that remarkably diverse meanings are attached to it in different areas. In central Nupe it has disappeared, and was probably last performed some time in the middle 1960's. The ensembles that traditionally accompanied it have migrated to other rituals that persist.

**Kàfo**. (< H. **Kaaf**) is a transversely blown horn, traditionally made from the bushbuck, *Tragelaphus scriptus*. It is open at both ends so that during performance, the player can modulate the pitch by placing his thumb over the small hole near the embouchure. Even so, only two distinct tones are produced, and to imitate speech-tones, considerable abridgment has to take place. It was blown traditionally to call people together for collective work, **efakó**. Although there were older men still alive in 1979-1982 who could play this instrument, in practice it has everywhere been replaced by the drum **enyà**.



**Kàkàti.** (< H. *kàakàakii*) is a long trumpet made in telescopic sections is blown for the Etsu Nupe, and indeed, for all the Muslim Emirs of Northern Nigeria. Traditionally made from brass, but today also from aluminium scrap, it derives ultimately from the **naḥir** of North Africa, still blown in some of the ancient walled towns such as Fez in Morocco (Blench 1984). The trumpeters are arranged into two groups, according to the length of trumpet they play. The first is a set of four short trumpets ca. 1m. long, one of which is played by the **Etsu kàkàti**, the leader of the whole ensemble. The second set consists of between six and eight trumpets, more than 2m. long. Arriens' illustration of the ensemble (Figure 9) broadly captures its appearance even in recent times. Together with the **gbàndò**

**Photo 13. Player of the *kpànsánági* flute, Sallah procession**



Source: Author photo, Bida 1981

drums the **kàkàti** group forms the core of the royal ensemble. The right to have trumpets in the court ensemble is in the gift of the principal Emirs, and it is normally awarded to the rulers of 'outlying' courts as a sign of their authority. The Etsu of Agaie and the Etsu of Lapai are both permitted a number of trumpets, but not the ruler of Pategi, because of the pre-Islamic roots of the Pategi kingdom. The trumpets are used to produce only three notes, the fundamental, the first harmonic an octave above, the fifth above it. This gives sufficient capacity for restricted speech-imitation, and there are a number of 'calls' that may be sounded. As the trumpets are loud enough to be heard all over Bida, even today, when the noise of cars and music shops creates a fairly constant barrage of white noise, the connection between authority, sound-producers and speech is thoroughly established. The trumpeters are organized into a 'guild' ruled by the **Etsu kàkàti**, and are recruited from the families of trumpeters. Unlike the players of **gbàndò** they do not play any other instrument, and most of them have other professions, such as trading or embroidery. Trumpeters play for the weddings of relatives of the royal family, for the Sala processions, and for the **tuka** on Thursday night outside the royal palace, when the royal ensemble plays for the Etsu, 'to remind him that it will be Friday tomorrow'.

**kàṇṇṅǔ.** (< H. *kàlàṅguu*) is an hourglass-drum played throughout most of Northern Nigeria. According to the players, it was introduced into Nupe by itinerant bands of performers, who came to Bida in the dry season in the late nineteenth century. At present there are two groups in Bida, each consisting of about six drummers, all of Hausa origin. They perform for aristocratic houses, and claim to have entered into **bára** clientage with two specific houses, although today they are freer to play for other people than in the past. Their praise-songs were, until recently, exclusively in Hausa, but they now perform in a mixture of Hausa and Nupe. Occasionally, freelance performers make their way down from Hausa, and these are often seen in the Sallah processions, a single **kàṇṇṅǔ** player accompanying a group of **enyà** players.

**kpàṅganagi** is an instrumental genre created in about 1960, consisting of a single player of the hourglass-drum **kàṇṇṅǔ**, and one or two **enyà**. In 1980-2 this was the most widespread musical accompaniment for marriages and naming-ceremonies in the urban Nupe areas, as it has the advantage of being cheap and mobile. The procession from the house of the bride to her husband's compound is normally preceded by **kpàṅganagi** players, and the women's dancing is normally performed to it. At a wedding, the players make the rounds of the male guests, drumming proverbs and **taki** praise-epithets for them, in return for small presents of money. The players in this ensemble present the closest parallel to the 'elevated beggar' status that many praise-drummers have in Hausa society (Ames & King 1971). They are regarded by guests at weddings as a nuisance that must be tolerated, and, although, eventually they do give small sums of money to the players, it is often with an ill grace. The musicians who play for these ensembles, are some of the only entirely professional musicians in the Nupe area, and they use motor-bikes to exploit as wide an area as possible when performing.

**kpànsánági** is a notch-flute made from the hollow, dried stem of the guinea-corn plant, with two, three or four fingerholes. The flute itself is very short, between 20 and 25 cm., and usually made by the player himself. Some instruments are covered in red stained goatskin, as this prevents the moisture escaping from the cane and consequent cracking appearing. Some players now use plastic or metal piping to make their flutes, and the tone produced is almost identical. This instrument is widespread throughout the Nigerian Middle Belt, used mostly in polyphonic wind ensembles. For the Nupe today, the **kpànsánági** is one of the more important of the 'praise' instruments. Its flexible melodic capabilities and high-pitched, penetrating tone have made it very suitable for accompanying ensembles. Because it is used individually, the transmission of performing skills is more idiosyncratic. There is unlikely to be more than one player in a group of twenty villages, and thus no place for a family of players. The income to be derived from exploiting such a large area may be quite considerable, assuming there is no competition, so players are normally unwilling to have pupils until they reach the end of their performing life. As a result, the transmission may be to a grandson, or to any individual in the area, who seems to show promise. The notch-flute can accompany almost any of the major ensembles, but it is particularly prominent in the music for farmers, which uses the large **sala** drums. The player will lead the ensemble, moving up to the most active farmers to praise them. The same player may move around as a free agent at a wedding, musically independent of whatever ensemble is playing, praising local men. The **angalè** ensemble that works south of Bida occasionally calls the flautist from the neighbouring village to perform with them, and during the Sallah processions, they are called as individuals to perform for noble houses. Nadel (1949:179) refers to the use of the notch-flute in the processions of the **Gàni** ritual at Kutigi, but this seems to have disappeared.

**kpàti**. (< H. **àkwàati**) was a sound-producer consisting of a large wooden box, usually a discarded packing-case, popular from about 1940 to 1960, among young people. The male performers would place the box on the ground end-on and then sit on it, slapping the sides rhythmically during a performance. It was accompanied by rattles made from old tin-cans and struck bottles. It was played on moonlit nights for the dances of unmarried girls.

**kùlě**. (< H. **kùgee**) is a clapperless iron bell of a type common throughout Africa, made from two triangular metal plaques, welded together at the flanges. It is roughly conical and is normally struck with a short wooden stick. Although apparently of Hausa/Fulani origin, in Nupe it is widely, if sporadically, used in traditional ensembles. It is sometimes included in the **enyà dúngùrù** ensembles for the mortuary ceremonies of hunters. As this type of interface between traditional instruments and those associated with the Fulani conquest is rare, the **kùlě** may be replacing simpler but essentially similar iron rhythm instruments, such as the struck hoe-blade. Stevens (1973) refers to a set of three double iron bells used in the ensemble to accompany the **elò** masquerade at Mokwa, but these may have been brought from Yorubaland.

A specific and indeed unique example of this instrument forms part of the Etsu Nupe's royal ensemble. A double bell of this type, with the two cavities joined by a semicircular bar, but made of bronze, accompanies the trumpets and drums in the Sallah processions. The relatively soft tone of the bronze means that the instrument is hardly heard, and its presence is largely a sign of status, like the enormous but entirely impractical brass kettles for ablutions also carried in the procession. Similar instruments have been reported from many of the other courts of Northern Nigeria, although the normal striker is a duiker horn. Nevertheless, like the other two instruments, the bronze **kùle** is specifically related to the authority of the Etsu, and since no story relates it to Edegi, it is probably safe to conclude that it entered Nupe in the nineteenth century.

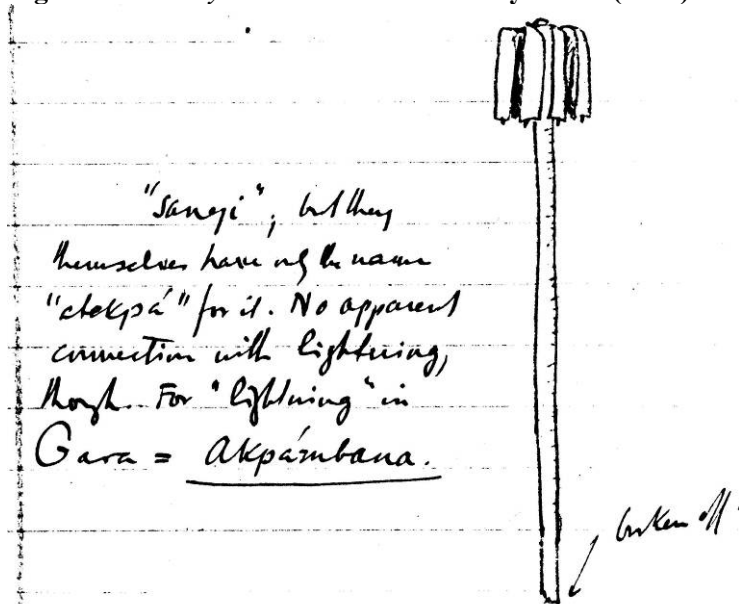
**pampami**. (< H. *famfamii*). A short, wooden end-blown trumpet occasionally seen among the Nupe, especially on the occasion of the Sallah processions. The instrument consists of wooden tube, about 2 cm. in diameter, and nearly 1m. long. The bell is either of wood, gourd or nowadays, scrap aluminium, but there is no separate embouchure. The player produce two notes, similar to those of the **kàkàki** but higher in pitch. The players are normally Hausa 'borrowed' for the occasion, playing on a more regular basis in the Northern courts.

**Sala** [=Sallah] (< H. *sallà*) is the principal Muslim festival of the year, described by Nadel (1942:143-4 & 1954:240), celebrating the feasts of Id-el-Fitri and Id-el-Kebir. The Sallah processions, between the prayer-

ground and the palace of the Etsu, and on subsequent days to the house of the Shyaba and other dignitaries, constitute the most significant arena for validation of claims to achieved status, through the recruitment of performers is drawn from the restricted pool of praise-singers.

**sâyì** is an iron bell-staff, consisting of a metal spike, between one and two metres long, with conical clapper bells welded to the head. Sometimes the staff also carries chains of rattling rings, sounding when the staff is thrust into the ground. Such staffs are widely used in Southern Nigeria, associated with chiefs, or with magical purposes; among the Nupe, their use is invariably connected with traditional religion. They are held by the priests of the **Vunshi** festival at Patita, and by the women controlling the Sogba cult (Nadel 1954:210ff.) in the Lemu area. It is believed that when a staff is thrust into the ground, it will continue vibrating of its own accord as long as the owner commands it. The secrecy surrounding these instruments meant that it was difficult to obtain very satisfactory information concerning them. Nadel

Figure 8. The *sâyì* bell-staff illustrated by Nadel (1936)



Source: Nadel field notebooks

(1954:191) asserts that the bell-staff was part of the paraphernalia of the **ndákó gbòyǎ** cult. Figure 8 shows a drawing of a **sâyì** staff taken from Nadel's field notes.

**Taki** (< H. *taakee*). Banfield (1914:421) defines this as a 'tune' but as Nadel (1942:303) points out it is really a 'personal drum signal'. The term **taki** is confined to towns. In villages, people ask the drummers to 'greet' (**emisa**) someone with a proverb, reflecting their status or known personal characteristics. In the towns, however, the **taki** for a 'big man' would usually consist of a drum 'transcription' of a greeting, appropriate to the man or his office. The concept and the word seem to derive from the Hausa/Fulani period from the early nineteenth century onwards, and represents a transformation of the older notion of drumming more ambiguous proverbs and greetings.

**Tsari** is name for the ensemble of drums used to accompany the boxing (**èkòcece**), once widespread in Nupe, but now confined to Kutigi and Enagi, west of Bida. The drums are morphologically different from any other Nupe drums, they may have been brought to Kutigi by the Benu, eighteenth century migrants from Bornu. They are wooden, cylindrical, two-headed with a dense net of laces, in squares, joining the heads. The membranes are ca. 30 cm. in diameter, and the drums are 50-60 cm. tall. A set will normally consist of two or three drums of this type, placed upright on the ground, arranged in a semi-circle in front of the player, who will also be holding a small drum of the **enyà** type on his lap. The drums are beaten with short straight sticks, rather like **angalè**, and arranged so that pitch contrasts can be used to 'speak' various rhythms and praises that form part of the boxing. An hourglass-drum frequently forms part of the ensemble, and an archive photograph from 1911 in the Frobenius Institute (redrawn in Frobenius, 1913:383) shows boxing at Mokwa, accompanied by two **tsari** drums and one **kānāngū**. The boxing in question seems formerly to have been more widespread in Nupe, and Frobenius (1913:389) relates that the Fulani smashed as many sets as they could find, and thus in his time there were only a few sets left in remote villages. Boxing is now confined to the day after the **Gàni** festival, but this is a matter of convenience, since the occasion draws back to Kutigi many of its people resident outside. The normal format is for young men to dress up in waist-cloths or animal skins and dance around the arena, challenging any member of the audience to come out and fight. In the past, individual boxers would be well known, and would have individual **taki**. Today, however, much of this has disappeared, although the proverbial challenges taunting the audience to fight are still heard. One example is;

Dàngi a dzà'gbà, bishengi da'be' i cekò  
 Cat has tied cloth waist, chick go come we box  
 A cat has tied on his boxing gear, chick come out and fight!

The gradual disappearance of boxing is linked to the decline of physical strength as an indicator of social prestige. Good boxers used to be highly regarded, and might be given wives in charity marriages, reflecting their prestige. If physically strong, it was thought likely they would be good farmers, and thus provide well for a wife and her offspring. The rise of the cash economy means that education and wealth are now perceived as better indicators of a man's ability to support his wife, and the rationale for the boxing seems to be only the bloodthirstiness of the audience, something reflected now by the younger average age of the audience attending the fights.

**Túká** is a general term used to describe the performance of the court ensemble on Thursday night, outside the palace of the Etsu Nupe. The royal trumpeters and drummers always appear at this occasion, together with any groups of travelling Hausa musicians in town. Although linked with the coming Friday, the content is not religious, consisting of a recitation of praise-names of the Etsu Nupe. Figure 9 shows the earliest known illustration of the **túká**, a drawing by Carl Arriens made during the Frobenius expedition and published in the comprehensive edition of *Und Afrika Sprach...*

Figure 9. Thursday night performance for the Etsu Nupe



Source: Frobenius (1913:397)

**Vunshi** is a ritual performance held every year at Patita, North-East of Bida, for the making of **wasá**, nominally a medicine against snake-bite but possessed of wider symbolic significance. There may have been a relation with the vanished **Gūnu**, as the same injunction to chastity for the three days of the ritual and the same musical instruments are used for the dances. The festival is controlled by the **Etsu vunshi**, who holds the **sàyi** bell-staff, and the ensemble is the same as for hunters, the **enyà dükù** drum, **bàbò** gourd-rattles, **kùle** iron bell, and the **dùngùrù** lute.

### 5.3 Spoken genres

#### 5.3.1 General

The usual Nupe word for ‘to speak, say’ is *gǎ* and all types of spoken genres, are known as *gǎgǎ*, ‘speaking, saying’. The subcategories of *gǎgǎ* are somewhat imprecise. Table 2 lists the existing Nupe terms and their approximate referents.

**Table 2. Nupe spoken oral literature genres**

Nupe	Gloss
<b>gǎmǎgǎ</b>	proverb, folk-tale, allegory, idiom, riddle
<b>ècǐ</b>	riddle, proverb, tongue-twister
<b>emila</b>	sarcasm, ridicule, jest
<b>tsámǎ</b>	sarcasm, ridicule, jest
<b>lǎbǎrì</b>	historical narrative

The following sections provide examples drawn from a very large body of texts collected during the period 1979-1982 divided according to conventional oral literature categories.

#### 5.3.2 Proverbs

Proverbs are one of the most characteristic African genres and many collections of proverbs have been published. Banfield & Macintyre (1915) appended a list of proverbs to their Nupe grammar and Banfield (1916) republished these in Nigeria with additional moral interpretations. In Nupe, proverbs are usually known as *gǎmǎgǎ*, a term which also applies to ‘story’, ‘allegory’, ‘idiom’ and sometimes also ‘riddle’. 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.

The following are examples of characteristic Nupe proverbs, taken from a collection of around five hundred. Each proverb is given a word-by-word translation followed by a free translation in English. Proverbs are often introduced by mantic or ideophonic expressions with no clear translation. The sense of the proverb is given below the translation, since this is far from obvious in many cases.

**Gyamǎ gǎ ánikǐ, zǔyě ásū Sòkó**

Chameleon will fall down shame is on God

When a chameleon stumbles, God is put to shame

**Interpretation:** This proved to be source of much disagreement, but the general idea is that if the world is in so much trouble that a creature as careful and deliberate as the chameleon can stumble, then God is not managing the universe well and is thus shamed.

**Kpakpa tindi! Tǎkpolo wū ‘kpa à, epè ma súkú?**

No meaning toad it tall not width also what about?

The toad may be short but is it not wide?

**Interpretation:** Everyone has some good qualities.

**èkpa dzákǎngi ècé o, dzákǎngi ècé wuru à**  
snail-shell child throwing euph. child throwing clam-shell not

A child can throw a top, but not a clam shell

**nusa nǎ cé u nǎ, kòshia u ci ‘ba zǔnmǎ**  
old man that threw it that grave his down town wall outside

an old man who threw one lies in his grave outside the town wall

## Roger Blench Nupe oral literature genres Circulated for comment

**Interpretation:** Children should play with what concerns them and keep away from other things. Some things are so powerful that even adults should be careful. Nupe children use the shell of the giant African land snail (*Achatina* spp.) as a spinning top. The particular reference of this proverb is to traditional medicines, warning people to not try and use charms they cannot control.

**Gbance gbance ekú nā ta 'bā o nā èlwà 'fo à**  
Meaningless corpse that is on shoulder euph. that pay heed day not  
By the time the corpse is on the shoulders, the day of the funeral is irrelevant

**Interpretation:** The past cannot be changed and speculating on how things could have turned out is wasted energy.

### 5.3.3 Riddles

Riddles, *ècî*, were probably originally part of the currency of adult speech, but they seem to be confined to children today. Some typical examples of Nupe riddles are;

**nnákó jī kata tàkò o, enyī u bè dē**  
Grandmother stays house back euph. hair her stretch outside  
Grandmother is sitting in the back of the room, but her hair is trailing outside

**Answer:** *nāwú* smoke

**tsàkà dī 'na ké ègbā**  
trousers burn fire except for string

**Answer:** *yèkó* a road. The image is of the grass burning off at the end of the dry season. Since the road is clear of grass it forms a visible line across the countryside. Traditional Nupe trousers were held in place with a cord, rather like pyjamas.

**nāngi bagi tsùgbà yěgù**  
goat male testicles forehead  
the he-goat has testicles on its forehead

**Answer:** *gómbara kòsù* the seeds of the *gómbara* shrub (*Cochlospermum tinctorium*). This shrub has yellow flowers and the seeds are arranged in opposite pairs along a single stem, thus resembling testicles.

**mi da gú Etsu, mi lo kùrà à,**  
I go meet Etsu I go bend down not  
**mi da gú Shyaba, mi da kùrà**  
I go meet Shyaba I go bend down

**Answer:** *katambà be dzúngi*. Large entrance hall and small gate in a wall. The image is that if you are going to see the most senior ruler you will go through the traditional entrance hall, which has an extremely high door, whereas if you go to see the deputy you will pass through a side gate.

### 5.3.4 Jests and ridicule

The terms *emila* or *tsámā* can be translated as 'sarcasm', 'ridicule' or 'jest'. They are often declaimed in public by men at gatherings such as weddings. They can also be heard beaten on the drums at informal gatherings of both sexes. Almost all of them carry strong anti-female sentiments.

nyizàgi wũ wá bagi à,  
 women she want man not  
 wũ gǎ shíkà a dzũ da wũ  
 she says menstrual blood it come out go her

**Interpretation:** When a woman doesn't want to have sex with a man, she claims to be menstruating.

Bambati lo! Bambati lo! nyizàgi gagbo wũ èsà nyi tú,  
 A large person! ~ woman very plump she good to have sex

àmâ bambè nã wúkpá nã wũ èsà ègwaza sà  
 but except that be tall that she good caressing is good

**Interpretation:** It is more enjoyable to have conventional sex with a plump woman, but if she is very tall, it is better to caress her.

### 5.3.5 Tongue-twisters

Tongue-twisters serve very much the same function in Nupe culture as in Europe. Children challenge one another to say them as fast as possible without making mistakes. Some examples are;

gbàrà 'bákó ba kábà bàgbă o  
 agama lizard large male is on wall chief woodcarver euph.

egi 'gbá lá egbà ba 'gbá 'gwa  
 child woodcarver holds axe cuts woodcarver hand

### 5.3.6 Folktales

Nupe have two types of story, folktales, *gàmǎgà*, and historical narratives, *làbǎri*. The typical folktale involves the doings of animals, with tortoise, *duku*, and hare, *kárigi*, typical protagonists. Stories are interspersed with short songs, and usually begin with a call and response with the audience. The following lines illustrate the opening of a long, episodic folktale told by Mohamed Gana in Bida in September 1980.

ècǐgi mi ákyà wũ áke ndákpá be dagba e  
 story my plunged It joins tortoise and elephant euph.  
 I have plunged into my story. It concerns tortoise and elephant

a cé dá èyà  
 they throw are friend  
 They were friends  
 repeated twice

u ci be á jĩ 'fo  
 it and again PAST do day  
 thus it had been for a very long time

gácĩ 'fo ní kété à  
 now day one only not  
 Now one day it happened that

a fé za nã ewũ ci be  
 they continue wander rise up quarrel and come  
 as they were wandering about, a quarrel arose

a wõ a gũ gǎní be dagba e  
they catch they climb together with elephant euph.  
as they were going up together with the elephant

ácĩ ñdákpa gǎ ‘Dagba wo wu mi èko wo à rè’  
so tortoise says ‘Elephant you beat me fist you not indeed’  
Tortoise says ‘Elephant, you can’t beat me up’

continues...

The style of this folktale should be compared with the segment of historical narrative in the next section. Although less repetitious, it is composed of short formulaic phrases only heard in this type of narrative. The grammar of these phrases is much more obscure and difficult to interpret without explication from a Nupe speaker. Historical narratives, by contrast are much more straightforward.

### 5.3.7 Historical narrative

The name for the traditional historical narrative, *làbǎrì*, a word also meaning ‘news’, is borrowed from Hausa, and it may be that the custom of relating these accounts diffused from the Hausa kingdoms. 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. These traditions are variable from one region to another and reflect local traditions of authority (Mason 1975). There are no formal oral historians to preserve the particular features of a narrative and these can vary considerably from one individual to another. Ibrahim (1992), although published as academic history, is clearly a compilation of oral traditions as transmitted to the author.

The following text represents the beginning of a lengthy quasi-historical narrative concerning the origin myth of the Nupe people, recorded in Bida in April 1981. It was recorded on tape and then transcribed with the assistance of Mrs. A. Oshodi. There is no particular formal context for the telling of such myths, and they vary markedly from one narrator to another. However, there are almost no Nupe who are not aware of the basic content of the story, so it is clearly retold quite often at informal gatherings. Nupe have many other oral traditions, principally concerning the coming of Islam and the incessant warfare between the ruling families during the nineteenth century. These are summarised in Burdon (1909) and in more modern, partly archive-based accounts in Mason (1977, 1979).

The Nupe origin myth attributes their founding to Tsoede [named Edegi in narrative to make plain the connection his hare-lip] who came from the Igala region, below the confluence of the Niger and the Benue rivers. Many cultural similarities, for example similar masquerades, do suggest ancient historical links. The Atagala or ruler of the Igala is greeted with *Bagadòzhì*! as is the Etsu Nupe. However, this expression only makes sense in Nupe [‘A man above all others’]. Nadel (1942:73 ff.) gives a summary outline of the entire story. The events in the narrative are often said to have occurred in the early sixteenth century<sup>7</sup>, although this date is only arrived at by placing it just before other semi-mythical figures in the Nupe kinglists.

The whole account consists of nearly 700 lines, so only a section is given here to illustrate the style. As can be seen, the major characteristic is a highly repetitious style, where the same observation is repeated several times, by simply turning the syntax around. This is strikingly different from folktales, such as animal stories discussed in §5.3.6, where the narrative drives ahead, although it is often anchored by the repetition of a particular feature such as a song.

Wũ gǎ ‘Èdègi, kìn bàbo gá á mã.  
He says ‘Tsoede land this that was born  
I say ‘Tsoede, this was the land where he was born

---

<sup>7</sup> Goldsmith (in Burdon 1909:51) gives the date of the arrival of Tsoede as 1505, an island of remarkable precision in a sea of vague claims.



**kín bàbo gá á mā Èdègi o,**  
land this that was born Tsoede euph.  
this land was where Tsoede was born

**Á ci lá u, ke egi mākanta nā lo**  
they and take him, like boy school that go  
and they took him, like a boy that goes to school

**Atágàrà o, ezhi nā èyé Atágàrà nā**  
Atagara euph. town that name 'I speak Igala' that  
Atagara is the town whose name means 'I speak Igala'

**Wū ci ba da yita Etsu nyá Atágàrà o**  
He and went stay in front of Etsu of Atagara euph.  
He [Tsoede] went and stayed with the ruler of Atagara

**Bo u dā o ácǐga Èdègi dā o Etsu nyá Atágàrà**  
Place he exists euph. thus Tsoede exists euph. Etsu of Atagara  
Thus Tsoede stayed at the place of the ruler of Atagara

**wū mā yì Èdègi wū ci lo à**  
he too was 'with a hare-lip' he and go not  
He did not have hare-lip when he went there

**Bagá bo u zhè Èdègi zhǐ o**  
There place he become 'with a hare-lip' return euph.  
It was there that he became hare-lipped before returning

**Nyá nā mā lá u ci zhè Èdègi nā**  
Thing that also bring him and return 'with a hare-lip' that  
The thing that made him hare-lipped before returning

**A gǎ 'Etsu nyá Atágàrà u de yéyè à'**  
They said Etsu of Atagara he has health not  
They said 'The ruler of Atagara is unwell,

**Bāyici nā wū de yéyè à nā**  
Since that he has health not that  
and since he is unwell

**ácǐga to a gá da te yìkūnu fití o wū cé zhǐ**  
so then they will go cut palm-fruit from above euph. it throw return  
So then they went to but a bunch of oil-palm fruits and down it came

and so on....

## 6. Nupe children's songs

### 6.1 General

Nupe children, like most African peoples, have an extensive range of children's songs and singing games (Blench 2001). African children's songs are poorly studied and Blacking (1967) represents one of the only attempts to document them in detail for a particular group, the Venda of the Transvaal. The total size of the Nupe 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;

<b>ècĩ</b>	story, folk-tale <i>also</i> riddle, proverb
<b>ení</b>	song with or without physical action
<b>enyà</b>	dance, also singing-games

None of these terms is specific to children's activities; *ècĩ*, *ení*, *enyà* are equally applied to adult performances. Some children's games have 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.

### 6.2 Songs without games

Simple songs are sung by children to themselves or in small group and correspond best to nursery rhymes. Such song repertoires are known from all over Africa; see Blacking (1967) for a comprehensive study of the children's repertoire of the Venda of South Africa. The texts are as obscure as any European nursery rhyme, without the benefit of the historical documentation available for English examples. Examples 1-3 give the texts of some common verses, known to nearly every Nupe child.

- |    |                               |                          |                               |                                  |                           |                                  |
|----|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. | <b>etsú</b><br>rat            | <b>na</b><br><i>dem.</i> | <b>ló</b><br>enters           | <b>dùkũ</b><br>cookpot           | <b>na,</b><br><i>dem.</i> | <b>aratwá!</b><br>short and fat! |
|    | <b>cingĩni</b><br>pounded yam | <b>be</b><br>with        | <b>mĩkòte,</b><br>shea-butter | <b>aratwá!</b><br>short and fat! |                           |                                  |
- 
- |    |                            |                      |                              |                       |                    |                        |                       |
|----|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 2. | <b>ebá</b><br>husband      | <b>da</b><br>is      | <b>kòrikòtò</b><br>unskilled | <b>nyimi</b><br>wife  | <b>da</b><br>is    | <b>wàwàgi</b><br>small | <b>o?</b><br>question |
|    | <b>kínkèrè</b><br>scorpion | <b>tun</b><br>stings | <b>'bá</b><br>husband,       | <b>ebá</b><br>husband | <b>tsu</b><br>dies |                        |                       |
- 
- |    |                           |                           |                          |                       |                       |                           |                          |
|----|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3. | <b>èyà,</b><br>friend     | <b>kingbàgbà</b><br>sheep | <b>na</b><br><i>dem.</i> | <b>mi</b><br>I        | <b>yébó</b><br>like   | <b>na</b><br><i>dem.</i>  |                          |
|    | <b>kingbàgbà</b><br>sheep | <b>nyá</b><br>own         | <b>mi</b><br>me          | <b>áyà</b><br>is lost |                       |                           |                          |
|    | <b>èyà,</b><br>friend,    | <b>bábo</b><br>where      | <b>mi</b><br>I           | <b>'a</b><br>will     | <b>le</b><br>see      | <b>kingbàgbà</b><br>sheep | <b>na</b><br><i>dem.</i> |
|    | <b>mi</b><br>I            | <b>yébó</b><br>like       | <b>na</b><br><i>dem.</i> | <b>yi</b><br>is       | <b>o?</b><br>question |                           |                          |

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

### 6.3 Singing games

The singing game is the most important part of children's repertoire. Most singing-games are accompanied by physical action and 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.

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Many of these singing-games are widespread in West Africa and parallels can be found in Griaule (1938) and Béart (1955). The examples below describe some examples of singing-games with texts and translations.

‘Baboon’

One game that is equally popular with both sexes is **gbògì** or ‘baboon’. 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;

**kpa ronce, gbògì nā gògǎ nā,**  
pile arch, baboon *dem.* passes, *dem.*  
form an arch as the baboon passes

**wū bé gògǎ yi leyé**  
it comes passes, we see [it]  
we see it as it passes by

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;

**a gǎ dǐ ’nù, ènù fé nîn kúsò**  
they will 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 the their neighbour, creating 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 the end of the song, 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 (1938:133) 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.

**’à shi ’dǐ, ’a shi ’dǐ,**  
[we] will buy palm-kernel oil will buy palm-kernel oil

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

**yi ’à ’dǐ, shi gbǎ gúwo**  
we will palm-kernel oil buy 2000 10 [cowries]

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**egà dā na egà dā na**  
word is this word is this  
This is the word, this is the word

**egà mā dùngùrù cèki**  
word also lute coarse-ground flour

**cèki mā cèki cènkafa**  
flour also flour rice

**cènkafa cènkafa yàwǒ**  
rice, rice, wife

**yàwǒ mā yàwǒ málàmi**  
wife also wife Imam

**málàmi málàmi Sòkó**  
Imam Imam God

**Sòkó mā Sòkó ànǎbi**  
God also God prophet

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**'bó wun 'à lele sanle**  
So that she will sleep [and] wake up

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**aní dan dòkò nyagbàn**  
one inside horse chest

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

**áníngá èjin sála Mákàmbò**  
Thus they do prayer at Mecca

**Ala Akbar!**  
Response changes to **Koro!**

**Ñdági lo 'kun na**  
Ndagi went war *dem.*

**Ñdági de 'zà won à**  
Ndagi get person catch not

**Ñdági yí 'à won Zùnmà**  
Ndagi still will catch Zunma

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

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

**eshìgi bà àdũwa**  
Dogs do prayer

**caŋ, caŋ! kóròbă caŋ, caŋ! kóròbă**  
**caŋ, caŋ! tin can caŋ, caŋ! tin can**

**yi dìn 'gbà yi dìn kácìn à**  
we stretch legs we stretch otherwise not

**ègbà yi 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 **kpatsũ** 'neck' was substituted for **nyagbà** 'chest' in line 20. However, the text is essentially fixed.

### 6. Nupe titles and praise-names

A major expression of the hierarchical nature of Nupe society is the multiplicity of titles and the greetings that accompany them. Some of these greetings are not intelligible in Nupe and may be borrowings from other languages. However, others are short phrases which are in themselves allusive and poetic. Table 3 gives some examples of these.

Table 3. Nupe ranks and appropriate greetings

Rank	Equivalent	Greeting	Interpretation
nágenũ	royal family	lègĩ o dā bà Sòkó o	Your profit is with God
kúsódù	royal family	ewò nā tsò'dù nā	Lake that is as large as the Niger River
ndàèjì	local chief	èdù wo'bà à	The Niger River smells no filth
ndákó'tsu	local chief	èkó bé 'kù nyi	Rot ends up spoiling something old
ndákó'tsu	local chief	gí yizhè gāká bè ànfāni nyi	Eating the world [enjoying yourself] for too long will bring no advantage
nyāgyà	local chief	lā dòkó cí'dù	Gallop the horse and alight by the Niger River
bàdekó	local chief	jī 'nyā nā ba wo nā	Do the dance that pleases you
māyāki	war chief	gā áci u fé áci	He does as he says
soje	war chief	wō 'yà a gò zhí	[If] you capture a friend, endure his return
bídā	village chief	lā kùrù dĩ 'zhì	Take the stocks and lose the city

Although these can be translated, it is difficult now to understand the reference and most Nupe find them charming but inexplicable.

## 7. Conclusions

Nupe society is highly complex, representing an Islamic hierarchical society superimposed on an original system of traditional religion controlled by masquerades. The hierarchy is cemented in place by an elaborate system of praise-singing which uses conventions known to the audience. Oral literature genres reflect this structure, all the way from simple children's songs to lengthy historical narratives. Because of the importance of tone in Nupe phonology and the potential to 'speak' using musical instruments, Nupe do not recognise boundaries between 'music' and 'speech'. Social and economic change in Nigeria and in particular rapid changes in access to wealth causes individuals and lineages to move rapidly up and down that traditional status ladder, acquiring titles and thereby the obligation to demonstrate their wealth through display. In a curious way, this has had the effect of conserving proverbs, praise-songs and musical performances for high status individuals, as these are essential in establishing their constantly revised status in society. By contrast, folktales, children's games and other genres which are 'under the radar' are rapidly disappearing as schools, radio and television penetrates ever further.

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