



## Nupe Traditions of Origin: A Re-evaluation of the Narratives

**Abubakar Abdulqadir Muhammad**

Department of Archaeology & Heritage Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria.

Corresponding email: [muhammadabubakar@abu.edu.ng](mailto:muhammadabubakar@abu.edu.ng)

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### Abstract

This article argues for a re-evaluation of the salient themes inherent in the narrations of the major Nupe traditions of origin, which have remained largely unrevised in the face of ever-increasing historical and archaeological writings on Nupe history. When re-evaluated within the spheres of current historical epistemologies, this article opines that these themes hold new answers to some crucial questions hindering the holistic understanding of pre-colonial Nupe history and worldview. It concludes that until and unless this revisionist approach is adopted, the study of ancient Nupe history will continue to remain largely speculative.

**Keywords:** Nupe, History, Niger, Kaduna, Language

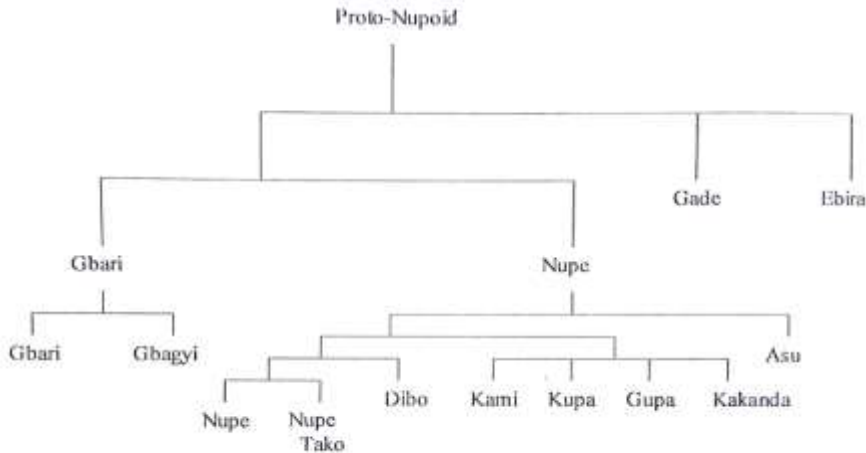
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### Introduction

Linguistically, the Nupe language is classified under what is known as the Nupoid group of the Benue Congo section of the very broad Niger-Congo family (Sheshi, 2018). The Nupoid group as observed by Blench (1989), Weise (2013), and Sheshi (2018) forms a cluster of distinct linguistic groups inhabiting the Niger-Benue Confluence area. These linguistic clusters have been listed by Blench (1989) as follows: Nupe, Gbari, Gbagyi, Ebira, Gade, Asu, Dibo, Nupe Tako, Kami, Kupa, Gupa, and Kakanda.

Although the proto-language of the Nupoid linguistic cluster is difficult to ascertain, Obayemi (1980), Weise (2013), and Sheshi (2018) speculate that the possible linguistic relationship among the peoples of the area could be a result of intergroup relations, complex migrations, and processes of absorption and language shifts spanning several millennia. This close linguistic relationship has led Obayemi (1987), Weise (2013), and Sheshi (2018) to theorise that the Niger-Benue Confluence may have been the original homeland of the Nupoid group. This, they argue, is based on the principle that the area where a high diversity of different but related languages is likely to be where the ancestors of the linguistic groups originated. Thus, the probable time depth for the emergence of the proto-Nupoid linguistic clusters in the area has been suggested to have occurred around 3000 B.C.E (Weise, 2013; Sheshi, 2018).

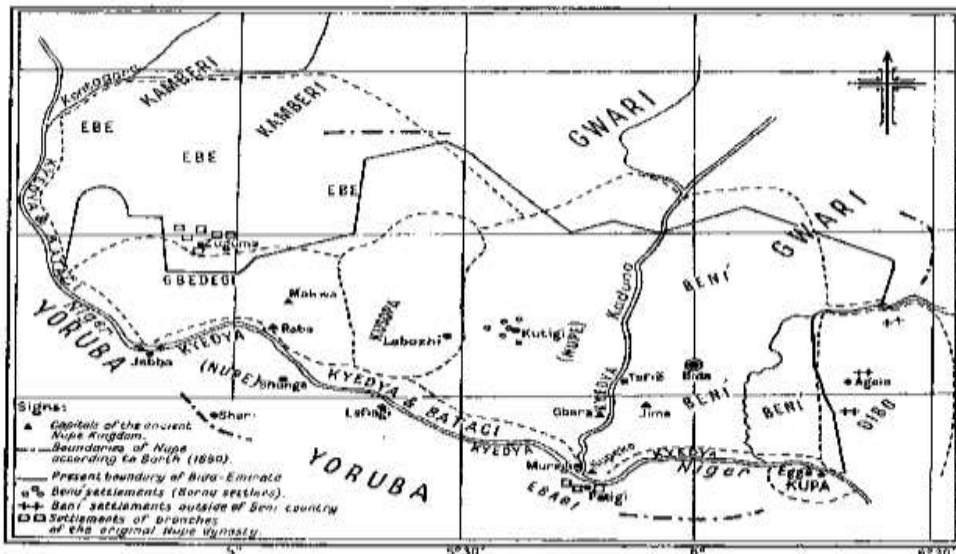
Figure 1: Internal classification of the Nupoid groups



Source: Adapted from Blench (1989)

According to available historical data, different Nupe subgroups have lived in small agrarian and fishing communities along the banks and hinterland marshlands of the rivers Niger and Kaduna before the 15<sup>th</sup> AD, within what is often referred to as the Bida basin area (Nadel, 1946; Sheshi, 2018; Jimada, 2016).

Figure 2: Nupe groups with their neighbours



Source: Adapted from Nadel (1935)



### Perspectives and Narratives

Understanding the traditions of origins of precolonial African peoples has been a daunting task for historians largely because of their mode of preservation, which is often through oral accounts handed down from one generation to another. In an attempt to preserve past events, experiences, and particular phenomena, valuable information is stored in the memory for posterity. Interestingly, some of the details no matter how disjointed and vague, point to the deliberate effort by African peoples to understand and interpret the world around them – a task that sometimes blurs the line between myth and reality. This has led to the diverse nature of the traditions, which are as complex and as varied as the peoples they represent, emphasising powerful themes that have come to characterise African oral narratives.

In the central Nigerian area, especially among the Nupoid-speaking groups occupying the Bida basin, this varied and often contradictory explanation of the peopling of the area is evident and can be categorised under three broad schemes, namely:

- a. traditions of oriental origin
- b. traditions of origin from powerful neighbouring states, and,
- c. traditions claiming autochtony

#### *Traditions of oriental origin*

The oriental origin being the most widely proclaimed narrative, traces the ancestors of the current populations in the area to the Middle East – Arabia precisely. These early ancestors of the Nupoid groups are believed to have migrated through Sudan to Hausa land, where they were driven southwards to their current location by the Hausa. This movement was said to have been under the leadership of a certain *Uqba bn Nafiu* and his followers from the Arabian Peninsula (Obayemi, 1983; Jimada, 2016; Sheshi, 2018). His name Nafiu which translates in Arabic to ‘fugitive’ is believed to have been corrupted to Nupe or Nufe (Sheshi, 2018). An analysis of this narration, however suggests that it came into Nupe history through the ruling jihadist elites at Bida, who were predominantly Fulani. This narrative, according to Law (2009), was a claim recorded in the early 19th century in Muhammad Bello’s *Infaq al-Maisur*, which traced the descent of the Fulani to ‘Ukuba’ identifiable as Uqba ibn Nafi – one of the commanders of the Arab conquest of North Africa in the later seventh century.

A variant of the oriental origin narration gives an account of how the progenitors of the Nupe people (who belonged to the Nubian negro stock) had migrated out of the lower Nile river area in Egypt owing to the mass Arab migrations into the area between the 8th and 9th centuries AD (Sheshi, 2018). This account narrates how these Nubian peoples had migrated through Sudan and Jukun land before they finally arrived at their present homeland. Along this line of reasoning was the claim by Frobenius (1912), that the Nupoid-speaking people had migrated westwards with their king, *Kisra*, from Napata in ancient Egypt, entering the Nigerian area through the Lake Chad corridor. These migrants were to found ruling dynasties upon their arrival among the Nupe and Borgu peoples (Sheshi, 2018; Jimada, 2016). A similar account was recorded from the Etsu-Tafyan (Pers. Com., 2018), who narrated how his forebears migrated out of the Nile valley to their current location during the time of Prophet Musa on the grounds of refusing to worship the gods of ancient Egypt. According to him, Tafyan was one of the earliest sites where they settled on their arrival through the Lake Chad area from the Nile valley. This informant also claims that his Bini ancestors



who left the Nile Valley were monotheists against the popular belief that the Bini were traditional worshippers.

The certainty of these narrations, however remains doubtful as they throw up a lot of questions begging for answers. For instance, these narratives do not provide us with exact details of the original homeland, why such migrations became necessary, how the migrations were executed, experiences en route, why and when the migrants had settled in their present ecological habitat, and so on, are some of the questions. Looking at the above narratives and their acceptance among the people today, one could be tempted to accept these original traditional tales as objective forms of valuable historical information. Unfortunately, they are tales that most likely emanated from the general unilinear colonial explanation of the origins of Negro cultural evolution that was very much in vogue at the time (Afigbo, 1983; Sutton, 2010). Although these oriental traditions of origin were deep-rooted in most societies of central Sudan, it is worthy of mention that the colonial enterprise magnified and exploited the narratives for their use, notwithstanding the often untenable claims (Obayemi, 1983; Sutton, 2010; Law, 2009). Having said this, it is safe to point out also that the oriental origin narratives fit into an ideological framework of Islam prevalent across central Sudan and an attempt by its adherents to want to identify with the birthplace of their newfound religion (Sutton, 2010; Law, 2009). Similar trends are also observed in the original traditions of other neighbouring societies like the Igbo, Igala Edo, and Yoruba. This narrative and its variants are viewed now as lacking credence in modern African historiography and generally treated as worthless as an account of the origin of any West African people owing to its lack of concrete evidence (Afigbo, 1983; Obayemi, 1979).

#### ***Traditions of origin from powerful neighbouring states***

Narratives under this category highlight the role of Tsoede in the establishment of a centralised political structure among the Nupe and the peopling of the area by groups from powerful neighbouring states. The narrative mostly commences with the era of the cultural hero Tsoede, an Idah prince with a Nupe mother from Nku: a settlement on the bank of the Kaduna River. Tsoede or Edegi is credited, according to some Nupe traditions, with the founding of the Nupe kingdom and the first Nupe king arriving from the court of his father, the Attah Igala, with royal paraphernalia. The tradition goes on to say that Tsoede fled the royal court at his father's death in fear of his half-brothers, who had plotted to kill him following a succession struggle (Nadel, 1946).

In contrast, a version of this same tradition collected in the course of fieldwork at Nupeko from the Ndazhitsu (Pers. Com., 2018), Tsoede was not an Igala prince but a Bini Dzuru (red Bini) from Nupeko. He was acclaimed to have fought and united the various early Nupe settlements along the Niger and Kaduna rivers before proceeding inland to conquer other Nupe groups and the Kambari from his first capital at Nupeko. The conflicting nature of the Tsoede legends is not surprising but rather typical of origin traditions in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa largely owing to the antiquity of societies in their present homelands - details of which are often lost to memory. Also, associating the Tsoede legend with the evolution of a centralised political structure among the Nupe from the majority of the accounts collected is problematic, given its lack of historical credence as a result of the different versions. Similarly, as observed during fieldwork, much of the tradition had undergone editing by informants containing misleading and equally unreliable evidence often crafted to suit the situation at hand.



Another tradition worthy of mention is that documentary evidence exists to a large extent. It is the tradition of origins of specific groups who, according to the traditions, had migrated into the area from neighbouring states. Local historians narrate how groups like the Hausa, Baribari, Fulani, and Yoruba had come to form heterogeneous communities among the Nupe in settlements such as Bida, Bokani, Kutigi, and so on. According to the traditions, groups from the Hausa city-states of Gobir, Yauri, Kabi, Katsina, Kano, Zazzau, and the Kanem Borno Empire migrated into the area in their numbers due to several socio-economic and socio-political factors (Nadel, 1946; Ewald, 1975; Jimada, 2016; Sheshi, 2018). Other groups like the nomadic Fulani and Gungawa (itinerant fishermen) also found their way into the area as a result of the favourable grazing environment and numerous water-bodies. The presence of the Yoruba has been attributed to trade via the Niger River and northward movements of hunting parties and mercenaries, majorly from the Igbomina and Okun areas to the south. Although most of these groups are still aware of their not-too-distant arrival, they lost their languages to the dominant Nupe-speaking population (Maigari, Pers. Com., 2018).

The influence of the above migrant communities is evident in contemporary Nupe life, especially in linguistic and material expressions. For this later migration that occurred largely from the 18th century onwards, there is abundant evidence from both oral and written texts stating how the natural environment and economic opportunities attracted these migrant groups to the area. In considering factors that could have led to these migrations into the area, it is pertinent to ask what form these migrations took, through which routes, and who the leaders of these distinct groups were? Until there are answers to some of these questions and more, these claims of migrations from within the general Nigerian area should be treated with caution. This, according to Afigbo (1983), is because the reality of this kind of claim of the entire group originating from neighbouring peoples makes it very suspect as a historical account. It, therefore, could be suggested that these traditions could all likely be fabrications arising from the human desire for identification with the supposedly great as a means of repute. They could also represent sociological anagrams indicating formal and informal cultural contacts of deep antiquity.

#### ***Traditions claiming autochtony***

Migrations from within the immediate Niger-Benue confluence areas area into (and through) the Bida basin is a generally acknowledged phenomenon among historians owing to the demographic makeup of the area and substantial claims from oral traditions (Obayemi, 1977; Weise, 2013; Jimada, 2016). Among the Nupoid groups, there is the claim that the earliest arrivals into the Nupe heartland were hunters whose original homelands were not known. These hunter-ancestors of the Nupe, on their arrival, met a group of giants they referred to as the *Epazhi* – the aboriginals – in a walled settlement called *Ebozhurigi* (Obayemi, 1979; Jimada, 2016; Sheshi, 2018). Interestingly, these aboriginal groups whose physical features were of enormous proportions with ‘ears as large as elephants’ disappeared or went extinct with the arrival of the itinerant hunters. A similar version of this tradition is narrated by Nadel (1935; 1946) and Ewald (1975), speaking of the *Kintsozhi*; a group who style themselves as the ‘owners of the country’ with no other home or origin. According to Nadel’s accounts, this group claims to be of pure Nupe origin and has always been in their present homeland from time immemorial. These versions of Nupe origin, as at the time of conducting fieldwork, had disappeared from the collection of oral traditions collected from the people. The reason for this could not be ascertained, but the name of the settlement – that is, *Ebozhurigi* – mentioned in the tradition was known to some of the informants.



There is no gainsaying that the majority of the people occupying the area today remain largely unaware of a single acceptable scheme explaining their origins and/or connecting them with a homeland (Ewald, 1975; Abubakar, 2016; Jimada, 2016; Sheshi, 2018). A phenomenon that has been explained to mean the 'deep antiquity' or autochthony of ethnicities in the area whose knowledge of the early peopling of this part of the world falls outside the range of precise memory of living generations (Obayemi, 1979; Jimada, 2016). Probable explanations regarding this problem could be sought from objective archaeological evidence, as what constitutes the bulk of oral sources when critically analysed would seem to have been exaggerated in importance: that is, considering if they were ever the case in the first instance.

Available archaeological and historical evidence from neighbouring Hausa and Yoruba lands that have been extensively studied when compared with the Bida basin illustrates a late stone age past characterised by hunting and gathering societies living in bands along watercourses. These groups later adopted crop production which enhanced stable and rapid populations due to food surplus through a process of environmental and subsistence adaptation. This would have led to the beginning of social complexity and intergroup relations that have continued to date among the people.

The people's traditions of origin have made efforts to explain these processes of currently relevant past socio-political relationships in their numerous quasi-historical narratives. These efforts are, however, riddled with distortions owing to either memory loss or the length of time involved. They have also witnessed deliberate manipulations and exaggerations for socio-political reasons driven by the question of origins, thereby fostering an implication of migrations and sometimes conquest (Finnegan, 1970; Mulira, 1979; Sutton, 2010). There is also the issue of misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and/or contextual misapplications of these traditions (Obayemi, 1977) which can only be checked through a combination of highly deductive and inductive research approaches.

### Conclusion

This article has examined the various major traditions of origin in the Bida basin as they seek to offer explanations on the peopling and intergroup relations in the area over the centuries. Powerful themes evident in the narratives were identified and analysed within a broader regional context taking into cognizance similar themes in the oral traditions of other neighbouring groups like the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Igala. In conclusion, it is worth noting that the popular traditions about the peopling and the evolution of social organisation in the area before the 18th century should not be taken to represent the true nature of past events. Instead, they should be treated cautiously, constantly re-evaluated, and always subjected to the epistemic rigours of history and archaeology. Until and unless this approach is adopted, an understanding of ancient Nupe history will continue to remain largely speculative.

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#### Oral Informants

S/No.	Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Type of Information	Place of Information	Date of Interview
1.	Alh. Muhammad Ndazhitsu-Nupeko	79	Male	Village head	Oral tradition	Nupeko village	11/12/2018
2.	Alh. Ibrahim Maigari-Jima	70	Male	Village head	Oral tradition	Jima village	12/12/2018
3.	Alh. Muhammadu Etsu-Tafyan	56	Male	Village head	Oral tradition	Tafyan village	15/12/1028