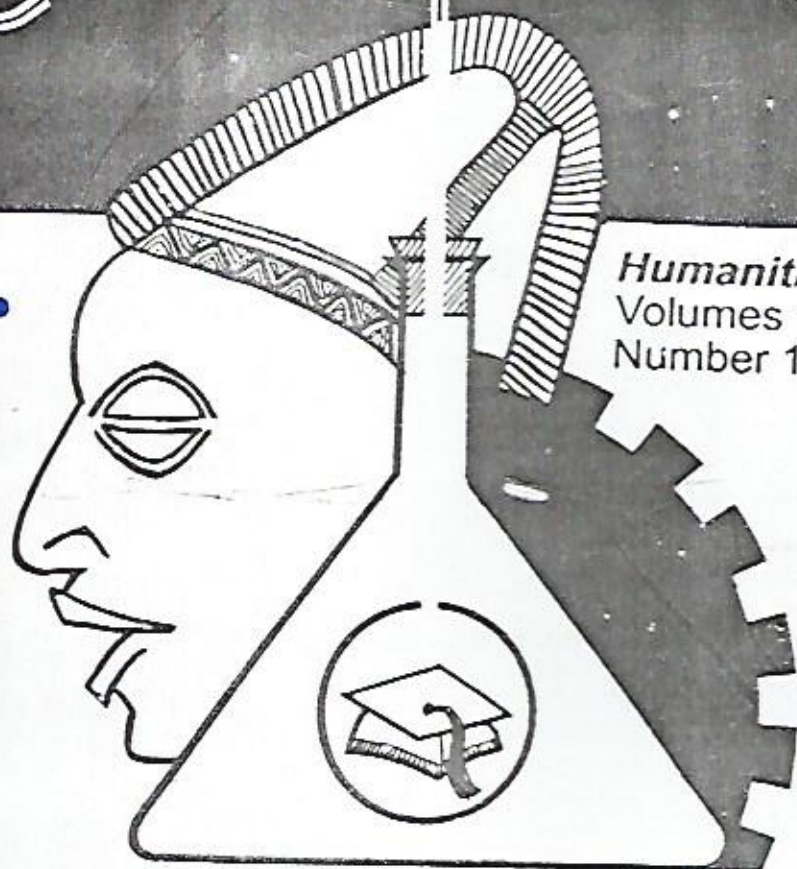


ISSN 0331-1988

# CENTREPOINT

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*Humanities Edition*  
Volumes 11 & 12  
Number 1

4

A JOURNAL OF INTELLECTUAL, SCIENTIFIC  
AND CULTURAL INTEREST



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# Types and Functions of Oral Literature in Nupeland

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## Abstract

*This article is on types and functions of oral Literature in Nupeland. It examines the cultural and aesthetic phenomena among Nupe in Nigeria. The focus of the article is on the categories of the oral aesthetic structures that exist within Nupe society. These aesthetic categories expose Nupe worldviews, aspirations and ideologies signalized in the cultural and aesthetic practices of the people. The question is what is the mode of production of the Nupe oral literary aspects? Ritual performance; involving poetry, drumming, singing, chants, incantations, innovations and prayers, for example, is examined and reviewed in many instances in different parts of Nupeland. The sample Nupe areas are Kusogi, Bida, Gbado, Lampai, Patigi, Lafiagi, Zambufu, Rogun and Kusomunun in Niger and Kwara States. This research discovers that the practices in these sub-regions are similar. The article argues that oral materials are inevitable resources in Nigerian settings using Nupeland as a case study here.*

## Introduction

A comprehensive examination of the culture and tradition of the Nupe in the said selected sample areas is done. The Nupe social structures, material productions, economic, political, legal dictations and the establishment of their cosmology and ideology serve as the progenitors and accelerators of a common culture. It is therefore hoped that, the scope of this article will serve as a fair representative of all Nupes.

## The Nupe

A people's background is the chief determinant of their oral literature. It therefore becomes necessary to give an ethnographic data about the people whose oral literature is being discussed in this article.

The ethno-geographic setting of the Nupe can best be deduced from writings of scholars such as Ade Obayemi's "Tsoede, Etsuzhi and Nupe Society" (1979)<sup>1</sup> and Micheal Mason's Tsoede Myth and Nupe Kinglist (1916)<sup>2</sup> among others. The Nupe can be found generally in the present Northern part of Nigeria, in Niger State, Kwara North, Kogi State and also in Lagos municipality. They are a distinct group of people who dwell mainly in the trans-Niger area. They speak Nupe as their first language. Idrees (1999) also recently observes Nupe land as being re-divided into almost two equal parts. He says:

Along the Niger, *Leaba* and *Yankyadya*, both situated on the North and West banks respectively and formed the North west boundary of Nupeland with the Borgawa (Borgu) on the end point of Nupe territory. In the hinterland, Nupeland shared common borders with the Yoruba sub-groups of Igbomina.<sup>3</sup>

### Theoretical Framework

This article adopts the archetypal theory for the analysis on the Nupe oral literary

it a basic theoretical framework of use. The archetypal method in oral literary analysis is more of a realistic method than most other oral theories such as evolution and diffusion which dwell only on the evolution of man and on the geographical linkage between man and man's settlement. This chosen theory constitutes a monumental study of human artifacts and it brings out more clearly, the ideological, religious, mythical and philosophical records of Nupe society. In the Nupe community, ideological beliefs and philosophical thoughts serve as the basis for the people's co-existence. It is the Nupe belief system and aspiration that help to throw light on the success of their co-existence and continuity.

This archetypal theory best accounts for the ways in which the existing oral structures are produced and transmitted in Nupe community. Since most of the materials deduced from the practice of the Nupe, have historical, mythical and religion basis, the ultimate comprehensibility of Nupe traditional forms should be through a record of the societal idiosyncracies, icons, norms, custom, ways of life, symbols and mannerisms.

(Oral literature comprises the communal activities of a set of people. It is the people's folklore. Some of these activities are daily and had remained part and parcel of their socio-cultural activities. In Nupe society, for a particular example, cultural aspects are in categories and a deep insight into them reveals that these aspects of cultural function as the socio-political and religious outlook of the people. These forms had existed in time immemorial and are recreated and regenerated in daily and annual practices of the Nupe. They are recognized as forms that indicate interconnection between art and the Nupe ecology. This accounts for why the oral literature of Nupe society is an immense tradition in terms of quality and quantity. On Nupe land, oral literature is recognized as the actual literary product behind the people's existence. It involves certain mythological imaginations based on collective unconsciousness in the past and present existence of the people and their future postulations.

The sub-genres of oral literature on Nupeland, help define better and indicate the role of this functional elements in Nupeland. Oral literary contents in Nupe land still serve as the moderating factors of Nupe literature, despite the influence of external religion and cultural system and their impact on the life of the people. Independently, the Nupe oral performer uses cultural forms to make historical reconstructions that will accentuate the cultural and social relevance of the people to foreground this, Salim (2000) gives a broader and more relevant view of oral literature thus:

An artistic form that uses language as its medium, then we accept that literature is not limited to the written or printed word alone. Using this definition, oral literature has all the necessary qualities to be considered 'literature' in the truest sense of the word.

This study becomes viable for the understanding of Nupe values, images and custom. Unless one for example learn to understand that in Nupe 'Tsode' myth, 'hill' and 'mountain' are used as antonyms and not as synonyms, one cannot get to the rich insight of the people's aesthetics. There is more strength and power on the hill and this is deduced from a phrase like 'bloody mountain' (*palligaa*) used in a poetic aspect to indicate 'hunger' and 'famine'. 'Tsode' is the Nupe ancestor and techniques in deconstructing the in-depth narratives that surrounded his existence, as a founder of Nupe Kingdom, needs to be understood, if the literature of Nupe is to be better comprehended. From *Tsode* folktales, one can regenerate the circumstances that brought about the present beliefs and practices of the people. Also from *Tsode* legend, oral literature can be reaffirmed as the mode of

aesthetic expression that has the quality of continuity in delivery; Ruth Finnegan (1968) in line with this adds that:

Oral literature is a tradition passed down, word for word, from generation to generation... it would be true to say that in Africa, in contrast to Western Europe and Asia, what can be found are quasi-dramatic phenomena particularly in parts of West Africa, perhaps the celebrated masquerades of Southern Nigeria. However, such quasi-dramatic elements of drama help to throw light on the oral literature in general...<sup>5</sup>

Finnegan bases her definition of oral literature on dramatic performance from which she observes other constituents of the Southern Nigeria people's culture. Certain features of oral literature therefore, expose the elaborateness of the oral literary compositions. Oral literature in the land therefore involves a dynamic process, that enhances perfect means of communication. Unlike written literature is textual, instrumental, temporal and less effective, Nupe oral literature is highly effective, communal, natural, intuitive and permanent. Hence, various definitions and views of oral literature have led to further arguments on its status in different communities. The Nupe is proved here to be one of those societies, where oral literacy status is high.

### Review of Related Literature

In world literature, Northrop Frye (1957) observes culture patterns as archetypes or prototypes of the past occurrence of a society, which the society unconsciously brings onto focus in recent times".<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud (1922) views "medicine, magic, and religion" as assemblages of human monuments and cyclical patterns of human activities put together in poetic, prosaic and dramatized forms.<sup>7</sup> Observing the Nigerian situation, Chidi Amuta (1999) similarly recognizes the inevitability of history in literature and concludes that existence of man is time and space and determined by the happenings around him.<sup>8</sup>

In the same vein, Echeruo (1973) describes oral literary criticism as:

A part of the history of culture in general, thus set in an historical and social context, dearly influenced by the general changes of intellectual climate, history of ideas, and even definite philosophies, though may not have produced systematic aesthetics themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Describing the South African situation, Kunene (1980) describes the relationship between archetypes and myths (oral literary aspects) in the following words:

Change is possible only through myth. Myth can create an acute vision defining in a familiar cosmic term the future, possibilities of a society and this is why they fall into the acceptable changing social order.<sup>10</sup>

The definition of oral literature can also be made clearer from our understanding of cultures and traditions since in cultures and traditions there are oral structures which are the intrinsic systems of ideas and worldviews of the people used for the indication of their modes of perception and sensibility. Apart from being "the trails of individual behavior, oral literature makes interpersonal relationships evident and persistent. Oral literature is 'the residual elements of religious consciousness and motivations that are built into the economic, political and social structures'. 'And like culture, the performance tradition is around us everywhere'.<sup>11</sup> Through language, community institutions, which embody community aspirations and ways of life, are created. Without language, culture would be impossible. The Nupe orator aims at fashioning out the language denied from cultural deposits and a language understood by his people. In this language, he is able to carry his peculiar experience and bring out his message, without altering the value, so as not to lose the communication effect of his performance. Hence, the aesthetics in any verbal performance in Nupe orator can only be better comprehended with knowledge about the linguistic background of the language. Madugu (1982)<sup>12</sup> for instance, observed that Nupe enikodzi (Nupe religious songs) were not translated according to the laid down orthographic conventions of the language and therefore lost their aesthetic and functional values.

It should however be noted that despite this and inspite of being divided into several sub-groups such as the *Binis*, *Kyadya*, *Batachi*, *Chekpan*, *Ebangi*, *Kusokpanchi*, *Gbedegi*, *Ebe* and *Dibo*, the Nupes share the same languages, common culture, similar modes of worship, same practices, and belief systems. Nupe sub-groups are therefore merely named according to their economic bases. For examples, the *Batachizi* are riverine dwellers, whose preoccupations are mainly fishing, canoe building, and rice cropping. The *Kusokpachis* are forest tenderers who produce mainly palm oil and kolanuts. On the general occupation of the people, Nadel et.al. (1942) observe that:

Apart from animal husbandry, the largest proportion of the Nupes were farmers and further partitioning of the Nupes is the coming of the Fulani group from Katsina origin into the

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Nupe political forum. They share the North-east Nupeland with the emirates of Lafiagi, *Tsonga backing the Aganye* and *Lapai* of Niger States (South-west).<sup>13</sup>

The geographical nature of Nupe land therefore, accounts for the philosophical, religious and mythical placement of the people. There are several rivers and streams enabling large scale fishing industries and agricultural farming. Water transportation is also enhanced as a result of the availability of water all around the settlement. Apart from River Niger and River Kaduna, other rivers include *Bokungi*, *Egwa*, *Yenmi*, *Dukku*, *Bongi*, *Eche*, etc. Being in a marsh land, the Nupe concentrate on millets, rice and guinea corn plantations. These food items subsequently serve as the people's staple food. At the domestic level, animal husbandry as mentioned in the previous introduction serves as a necessity in almost all Nupe households. These animal products include fowls, goats, rabbits, fresh and dry fish. This geo-historical background given here is needed for a good perception of the oral literary contents of the Nupe.

#### Nupe Oral Aspects And Features

The classification of Nupe oral forms is further supplemented here with practical examples of each type. Emphasis is not on the aesthetic content of these elements alone, but also on their functions within the socio-cultural context of the land. Oral literary forms in Nupeland can be divided into three broad parts as follows:

##### (a) Nupe Oral Prose, Tsodemyth And Folktales

Like written prose, the oral prose of any society is its narrative content. Structurally as well, oral prose contains types of stories involving experiences in every aspect of human life. These stories might be mythical or legendary. They may be machen or fairy tales and folktales. Myths are derived from journey experiences, adventures and settlement troubles and sage. The settlement myths in Nupeland revolve round the circumstances that led to the establishment of Nupe people. And according to Kunenc(1980), "myths are oral prose forms that create acute vision that define the future possibility of a society"<sup>14</sup>.

The origin of Nupeland is associated with *Tsode* tradition. *Tsode*, who was also referred to as *Edegi* by Nadel(1942)<sup>16</sup> and Mason(1980)<sup>17</sup> in their extensive historical study of Nupeland, is the Nupe ancestor. Saad Abubakar(1974), for example, observes

that, "The name *Tsode*, is widely used in Nupe land simply because it plays a very significant role in the traditional belief system in Kin Nupe land) A.A. Idrees (1998) also states that: "Europeans could not but tap on the most sensory part of the peoples' practice- 'ancestral worship' to get their selfish mission through. *Tsode* is believed to have brought the Nupe dynasty to existence in the first half of the fifteenth century" <sup>15</sup>. The importance of the myth that surrounds this ancestor of the people can further be deduced from Saad Abubakar's further observation that:

"to a large extent, *Tsode* is still deified and worshipped nationally by Nupe people. A situation that was effectively exploited by the emergent authorities to be able to maintain law and order within the kingdom" <sup>16</sup>.

This mythical figure (*Tsode*) established a central ruling authority and unified the Nupe towns. According to an oral source, emblems and figures of *Tsode* were carved in his memory. They are not mere museum artifacts, they serve as symbols of worship in virtually all Nupe settlements where *Ndakogboya* masquerade festival in particular is very much in practice for the worshipping purpose. "The actual chain" used by *Tsode* known and called *Eghan Tsode* is for example kept by the Nupe *Kyede* as a symbol of worship. The chain represents history and family ties. It is the genealogical rope of Nupe tradition, which is the *Tsodian* tradition. This explains why *Tsode's* image and importance in Nupe history has allowed for the survival of his descendants up till the present day. *Tsode* myth reveals that *Tsode* migrated into Nupeland after his success in a power tussle with his enemies of Igalaland. Assessing the high esteem of this Nupe mythical figure, Idrees (1998) concludes that:

*Tsode* dynasty is to Nupeland, what *Seifawa*  
Is to Kanem and Borno, and what *Eweka* dynasty is  
to Benin Kingdom. *Tsode* is the Yoruba *Oduduwa*  
equivalent <sup>17</sup>.

The mythical figure here, (*Tsode*) expanded the land through fighting series of wars, he won as a result of his immense magical powers. After each war won, he used his children in turns to make sacrifices, in order to be able to continuously defeat his enemies and protect his people. During one of the wars that *Tsode* fought, for his people, on his horse, he was said to have sustained physical injuries on the face, abdomen and chest. The injury marks become the subsequent facial, abdominal and chest marks of his descendants.

The marks became emblems of the dynasty. *Tsode's* descendants believe that they have to wear his image and emblem so that he can recognize them easily from wherever he oversees them to enable him safeguard them. The Nupe people do not believe that *Tsode* died a natural death but believe that after sustaining injuries, he got down from his horse and sank in a canoe, leaving behind the chain earlier on referred to on the surface of the River Niger for his people to hold on to. The chain is the lineage rope. And *Tsode's* worship calls for a festival celebration known as *Kuti Tsode*. During the *Kuti Tsode* masquerade performance, certain rituals are carried out to bring the people together under a common ancestry.

Apart from *Tsode* myth, the legend of certain warriors such as *Masaba, Jiya, Lukpan and Umaru*. Prose narratives also involve epic stories about unending journeys of the people's ancestors. Epic is referred to as *etan*. In Nupe literature, there are prose narratives or folktales known as *echin* used at evening times for relaxation and didactic purposes. The audience is usually the children of the land and the narrator is usually an older person. In these stories, archetypes of events, characters and attitudes are used to depict social dynamics in the philosophy and historical culture of the people.

These aforementioned aspects of Nupe oral literature have their thematic, aesthetic and structural forms. Hence they also serve socio-cultural functions. Last but not the least in the group of Nupe oral prose is Nupe proverbs, witty sayings and riddles and jokes. The use of these later parts is socially stratified. Elders use proverbs, while riddles and jokes are meant for children.

#### (b) Nupe Poetry And Use Of Native Icons:

There are different types of poetry in Nupeland. They include: praise poetry, incantations, dirges, lullabies, divinations, prayers and chants. Let us take a look at the following example:

##### Kuti Masquerade Chants:

Kuti, Yezhibo  
Kuti, meijini  
Dabodin lomin  
Tapatio le yan dodzi ye  
Gbaruru gba tundun.  
Kuti, welcome

Kuti, owner of human blood  
 One who enters through the back door  
 One who oversees the land from hill top  
 A mighty movable house!

The societal function of the masquerade is recounted in *Kuti's* chants above. In

symbolism and onomatopoeia. Hill (*pati*) for example is a symbol of the masquerade's long height and it also signifies the a histo-geographical settlement of the land by *Tsode*. The importance of Nupe land as the major motif is the initial invocation of the masquerade-*Kuti, yezhibo*. In the masquerade's poetry, there is a detailed linguistic composition displaying the might of the masquerade. Ideas about the masquerade's multi-functional and prophetic overseeing, are juxtaposed in his praise and used to show *kuti* masquerade's super ordinate influence over its people. Through this, *Tsode* is seen as a deity capable of doing very many number of things at the same time. Man is therefore contrasted with the superior in the chanted lines. There is also an indication of the practical concern by the masquerade on the aspects of the societal livelihood. One may therefore conclude that *kuti's* praise poetry and chants reflects the functional value of its presence to the community. And apart from the use of natural images such as that of 'mud' in the praise, it is believed that the masquerade controls life and is also referred to as the owner of 'human blood' that, can take offenders' lives, when angry. Since it is capable of foretelling future occurrences, the praise singer employs time to relay his messages. The image of a house in *Gbarurugbatungdun* (a mighty house that moves with great force) is synonymous with the power of this mysterious figure.

Praise poetry or panegyrics is usually referred to as 'dido'. An individual could be praised according to his/her pet names. Some epithets are derived from one's genealogical traits in the land. At times, oral praises are based on one's occupation and mannerism. The praise poetic words are carefully selected by the praise poet to suit one's decency, for example. Hear the following praise of a woman, for instance:

Nawo, gbodo  
 Gbodo suwun la tun  
 Ebo ga man un la donchi.

Nawo, silent walker  
 Silent walker that used pestle to fight  
 If justified, uses mortal instead.

The image of pestle and mortal are symbolic of the gravity of Nawo's reaction to different situations. Praises could also be on the royalists group or on masquerades in order to give allusions to the expected codes of conduct, deviations from these conducts and also to appease the forces that be. Other forms of Nupe oral poetry are occupational poetry used to strengthen the hard work of a group of people in the same field, for instance, there is the poetry of *Tsuachizhi* (goldsmiths), *Ndachedzi* (hunters), *edehichidzi* (cloth weavers), *enunun chidzi* (farmers), *Yikanwunchidzi* (fishermen), etc. At trade or work, each group of specialists are seen reciting their poetry in order to boost their effort and usefulness to the community of their birth.

Topical poetry is another form of poetry. It is an abusive form of poetry known by the Nupe as *gangban*. *Gangban* literally means 'warnings'. This form of poetry is used to correct the ills of those in power. It has a dual purpose though. It helps to satirise/molest the individuals who are not in tune with the laws and dictations of the land.

Another form of oral poetry in Nupeland is religious poetry known as *ebasan*. This form has a structural system involving three stages: (a) the invocation of spirits, (b) supplication i.e. request moment during when the religious poet 'talks to God' and asks questions. The last stage of religious poetry is the divination stage when the diviner reveals what is assumed has been dictated to him by the unseen forces. This stage involves sacrifice. And the sacrifice has to be carried out by the client of the diviner at a particular time of the day and in a particular place. Lullabies, poems used farm work. Another example is as follows:

Bambo egi e gigilo  
 Komaragba  
 Komara sun zu ye  
 A roundish keg is like a developed child  
 Laziness is disgraced  
 Laziness feels shame.

Laziness is personified to emphasis its adverse effect on man. As lullabies are sung, the child naturally gets the emotional message of the mother and sleeps off.

Funeral poetry is another Nupe cultural material of use. This has religious undertone and recounts the good deeds of the deceased. Repetition is on the unfairness of death to humanity. The tone is prayerful.

### (c) Nupe Oral Drama and Performance Significance.

Oral drama is the third major genre of oral literature in Nupeland. Performance in Nupe society for example, the *Ndakogboya* masquerade performance is an elaborate and theatrical aspect of culture, involving specialized scenery (usually the market square of the king's palace arena). *Kuti* mask festival brings both the secular and the sacred together in the same socio-aesthetic environment. However, this festival is a fusion of culture and aesthetics meant to help the individual survive within the group. The performance of *Kuti* mask is an elaborate and expression one. It begins by humming the rhythm of the drums that usher it into the performance arena and takes characteristic steps. The drummers follow suit and as they drum they change the tempo of the music and the masquerade adjusts to the changes. This instance is known as *eyankuti* (kuti-dance). Running into Nupeland during performance, one would easily feel the excitement of the entire communal members- the pandemonium and excitement of the entire communal members- the pandemonium and excitement in the atmosphere of the land. And this is an indicator of the essence of the festival. *Kuti* proclaims laws and enforces them. Out of all Nupe masks, it is the most reverend because of its functional use. The natives integrate *kuti*'s presence as a divine intervention as it is said to be a representative of the ancestors on earth. Among the functions of *kuti* are:

- (a) Religious Ritualisation (*eyanwo*)
- (b) Rites of passage function
- (c) Judicial and legal functions of *kuti* cult
- (d) Moral edification
- (e) Social communication
- (f) Selection of succeeding title-holders
- (g) Divination function
- (h) Offering of rituals, prayers and sacrifice on behalf of the society\
- (i) *Kuti* mask itself as a culture artifact and its costume as a cultural signifier.

There is usually also dance, songs and music. The entire village is the audience as every Nupe comes out to pay allegiance and loyalty to the ancestors represented by the masquerade in life.

Traditionally, man is considered as "an integral, somatic and extra material entity" and like many tribes in the developing countries, the Nupe society cannot be left out of ritualistic and supernatural metaphysics.

### Conclusion:

#### A Future Projection Into Nupe Orature

Nupe oral literature opens the door into Nupe cultural practices, world view, vision and aspirations: The inherent social structures reveal the political history of the land links this history of with the present and gives room for future adjustments and shaping of the traditional context in Nupe land to suit the contemporary existence. Most importantly too is the use of oral literary forms, such as folktales, riddles and jokes all implanted with skills, for the inculcation of knowledge on youth. This helps to maintain the Nupe cultural continuity. And behind the educational motif of the oral literary structures, these forms also function as relaxation and entertainment elements of culture. This explains why the Nupe oral producer focuses on the aesthetic cultural records to get his educational and communication motives through. In addition, collective performances encourage people's spirits and relief the tension of the hard labour on Nupe farms, rivers, weaving arenas, where they have all the day been to learn the skills and produce the products necessary for carrying on the tradition. In all traditional ramifications, and sustenance, this article supplements studies in Nigeria oral literature and promote the performance heritage of Nupe people.

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