LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The Nupe language family (Nufawa, Nupeci, Nupecidji, Nupenchii, Nupencizi) is spoken primarily by the Nupe people of the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. Its geographical distribution is limited to the west-central portion of this region and maintains pre-eminence in Niger State.

The Nupe language has never been static but has actually been growing and transforming over the ages. It has transformed from being an Old Nupe language into a Middle Nupe language and finally to its present form of being the Modern Nupe language.

The Nupe people have various traditions. Much of their culture was diluted by the Usman Dan Fodio jihad of the 19th century, but the Nupe still hold on to some of their culture which is very similar to that of ancient Egypt. Many Nupe people often have tribal marks on their faces, some to identify their prestige, their family identity, for protection, and as well as jewelry adornment. However, these traditions are dying out in certain areas of the region. Nupe art is often abstract. They are well known for their wooden stools with patterns carved onto the surface.

STUDYING NUPE IN THE UNITED STATES

Please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website at http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/

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WHO SPEAKS NUPE?

Nupe belongs to the Nupe-Gware subbranch of Kwa and is presently spoken in the states of Kwara, Niger, Benue, parts of Plateau States, and the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. Nupe, traditionally are often called, “Tapa” by the Yoruba. This ethnic group is located primarily in Middle Belt and Northern Nigeria. They are the dominant ethnic group in Niger but an important minority in Kwara State.

Although a version of their history claim that they originally lived in Egypt, the more common tradition traces their origin to Tsoede who fled the court of Idah and established a loose confederation of towns along the Niger in the 15th century. The proximity of Nupe to Yoruba Igbomina people in the south and to the Yoruba Oyo people in the southwest led to cross-fertilization of cultural influences through trade and conflicts over the centuries.

Many Nupe were converted to Islam at the end of the 18th century by Mallam Dendo, a wandering preacher, and were incorporated into the Fulani Empire established by the Jihad led by Usman dan Fodio after 1806.

WHY STUDY NUPE?

There are probably about 3.5 million Nupes, principally in Niger State. Grimes (1996) cites a figure of 1,062,000 speakers of Nupe; UBS notes one million speakers (1982); Herault (1981) states there are approximately 600,000. Bokani (1985) report that 1963 census shows 326,017 speakers and that “this figure must have tripled since then.”

The Nupe language is also spoken in Kwara and Kogi States. They are primarily Muslims, with a few Christians and traditionalist (ancestral worshipper). The Nupe people have several local, traditional rulers. The Etsu Nupe (Bida) is not Nupe and is actually part of the Fula tribe but they came to rule the Bida in the 1806. They have no present capital, although they were originally based at Rabah and only moved to Bida in the nineteenth century.