

# Historical origin and customary land tenancy of rural community in Nigeria

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## Introduction

This paper is a record of the historical origin and customary land tenancy of the agricultural villages in Nigeria, West Africa. The ethnic group of the people concerned are the Nupe, which is the most dominant ethnic group in Niger State of Nigeria. The research was conducted in the area locates on the so-called “Middle Belt” which stretches across central Nigeria longitudinally between the eighth and the twelfth parallels north. The Middle Belt is populated largely by minority ethnic groups and is characterized by a heterogeneity and diversity of peoples and cultures. In the Niger State, the other major ethnic groups apart from the Nupe are the Hausa, the Gwari, the Fulani and the Kumuka. Literature concerning the rural Nupe community are very rare (Nadel, 1942, 1954; Forde, 1955; Masuda, 2002). The contents of this paper are mainly based on the information gathered by direct observation and unstructured interviews with local people during interrupted fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2009. This paper aims to fill the information gap about the rural society in Nigeria, as information about the society of this country has been limited due to prolonged political instability since the 1980s.

## Research Area

The area in which I conducted fieldwork for this paper is the “Cis-Kaduna” region of the Bida Emirate of the Niger State. Niger State locates on the central-north geopolitical zone of Nigeria<sup>1</sup>. The drainage of the state is dominated by the Niger River which forms its southern boundary. Bida Emirate is one of the eight tradition authorities of the Niger State, a successor to the old Nupe Kingdom established in the fifteenth century. Figure 1 indicates the location of the research area covered by this study. The term “Cis-Kaduna” was found in the Gazetteer of Nupe province published in 1920 (Dupigny, 1920: 6). It is a geographical term used to describe the districts east of Kaduna River (Nadel, 1942, 181). The river is the largest tributary of the Niger in the state. It runs in the middle of the Bida Emirate from north to south. On the opposite side of the Cis-Kaduna is the “Trans-Kaduna” region. These two terms originated from the Nupe name of the Kaduna River, *Lavun*. Cis-Kaduna is the district east of Kaduna River, and Trans-Kaduna is the district west of Kaduna River. The domain of the current Bida Emirate covers territory of

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<sup>1</sup> Niger State came into existence in 1976. The State was carved out of the former North Western State and comprised most of what was before then known as Niger Province. During the British protectorate from 1900 to 1960, the region where the Nupe people lived was called the Nupe Province which was put under Northern Nigeria. While the Niger State is now officially recognized as locating at central Nigeria, historical literature referred the state as a section of the northern region.

six Local Government Area (LGA)<sup>2</sup>, which are Katcha, Gbako, Bida, Lavun, Edati and Mokwa.

The largest town in this area is Bida, which is the second largest city in the Niger State. It is the headquarter of the Bida Emirate ruled by Bida *Emir*, who also possesses the title of *Etsu Nupe* (king of Nupe). The dominant ethnic group of the research area is Nupe, with an absolute majority of them being subsistence farmers. It is estimated that there are close to 1.5 million of Nupe in Nigeria, with majority of them reside in Niger State<sup>3</sup>. Table 1 indicates the population and population density of Bida Emirate and Niger State. The figures are taken from the 1963 and 2006 population censuses. Population and population density of the Niger State and the Bida Emirate has multiplied by three folds in four decades. The Bida Emirate takes up for 19% of the land area of the Niger State, and in 2006, 27% of the Niger State population inhabit in the Bida Emirate. It has a higher population density compared with other parts of the Niger State. Within the Emirate, the Cis-Kaduna region is especially dense. The difference in density of population east and west of the Kaduna River lies in the historical fact of the Fulani conquest of Nupe and the immigration of the Fulani rulers and their huge army, warriors, slaves, courtiers, and other dependents into the area east of the Kaduna, where they settled, occupied the land, and built their capital and numerous villages (Adeniyi, 1972a).

### The Nupe Society

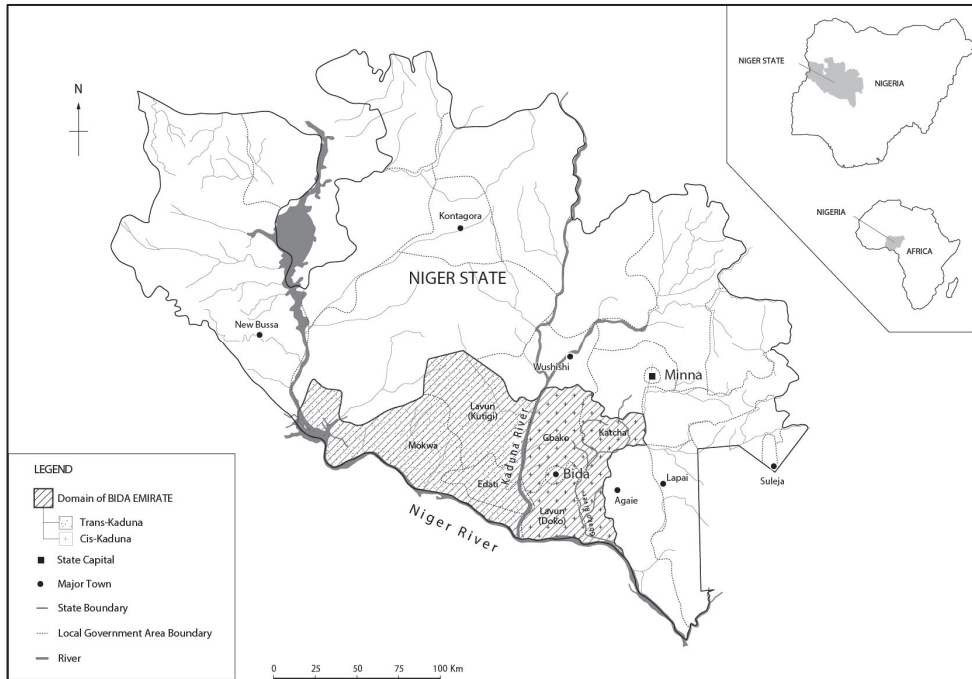
The Nupe people live in the heart of Nigeria in the low basin formed by the villages of the Niger and Kaduna Rivers (Forde, 1970:17). Nupe is the dominant group in Niger and Kwara States. They were first described in detail by ethnographer Siegfried Nadel, whose book *Black Byzantium*, remains as an anthropological classic. Accounts of the Nupe society can also be found in Forde (1970), Ibrahim (1992), Mason (1981) and Ismaila (2002). There are probably about a million Nupe, principally in Niger State<sup>3</sup>. They are primarily Muslims. Christianity was brought into the area since the mid-nineteenth Century. Traditional religion still exists but is weak. The Nupe trace their origin to *Tsoede* who fled the court of *Idah* and established a loose confederation of towns along the River Niger in the fifteenth century. Nadel refers to *Tsoede* as the culture-hero and mythical founder of the Nupe kingdom. The Nupe were converted to Islam at the end of the eighteenth century by Mallam Dendo, a wandering Fulani preacher, and were incorporated into the Fulani Empire established by the *jihād* led by Usman dan Fodio after 1804. Mallam Dendo's second son, Usman Zaki became *Etsu Nupe* (King of Nupe) in 1832 and the Fulani conquerors have been ruling the Nupe of the Bida Emirate since then. The city of Bida fell to the colonial British forces in 1897, but the traditional administration of Bida Emirate has been preserved until now.

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<sup>2</sup> The modern public administration of Nigeria operates at a three tiers structure. The first tier is the Federal Government, the second tier is the State Government and the third tier is the Local Government (LG). There are 25 Local Government Area (LGA) in the Niger State as of the time of this research.

<sup>3</sup> The Nigerian official census in 1991 placed the population of Nupe at 1,062,000. The most recent estimation made by the US Center for World Mission, a Christian organization, is 1,472,000. <http://www.uscwm.org/index.php/about/>. (Accessed on 30 August 2012). The World Christian Database estimates that 92% of Nupe are Muslims, 5.2% are Animists and 2.8% are Christians. <http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>. (Accessed on 13 July 2020). Nupe account for about 1% of the total population of Nigeria.

**Figure 1. Location of the research area, Cis-Kaduna, Bida Emirate, Nigeria<sup>4</sup>.**



Source: Produced by author based on information gathered in fieldwork.

**Table 1. Population and Population Density of Bida Emirate and Niger State.**

Locality	Population (2006)	Population Density per km <sup>2</sup> (2006)	Population (1963)	Population Density per km <sup>2</sup> (1963)
Bida Emirate	1,052,998 (27%)	80	385,093 (32%)	28
Cis-Kaduna <sup>5</sup>	542,781.5 (14%)	94	196,963 (16%)	43
Trans-Kaduna	510,216.5 (13%)	69	188,130 (16%)	21
Niger State	3,950,249 (100%)	52	1,194,508 (100%)	16
Niger State (Excludes Bida Emirate)	2,897,251 (73%)	46	809,415 (68%)	14

Source: Data derived by author based on 1963 and 2006 population censuses.

<sup>4</sup> It should be mentioned here that multiple sources of information have been combined in order to produce this map. First of all, official map indicating the boundary of all local government area of the state was almost inaccessible. What I could get was only a poor-quality copy of the map produced in 1997 by the Survey Division, Ministry of Works, Transport and Housing of the Niger State Government. Over the past years more Local Government Area has been created, from 9 in 1976 to 42 in 2002. However, some new LGAs have been dissolved because they were not gazetted by the National Assembly. The LGA number then went back to 25. This history leads to some confusion of the boundary of LGAs. Second, there is no available map showing the current domain of the Bida Emirate. I draw the boundary by referring to a few maps showing the ancient kingdom of Nigeria, as well as information provided by the Secretary of the Bida Emirate Council.

<sup>5</sup> For figures of 2006, population of new Lavun LGA is evenly divided into two and allocate to Cis-Kaduna and Trans-Kaduna. For figures of 1963, data of the old Lavun LGA is used for Trans-Kaduna, and data of Gbako is used for Cis-Kaduna. Number and boundary of LGAs have substantially changed from 1963 to 2006.

## Historical origin and customary land tenancy

### 1. Villages founded by migrants

Bida was the original habitation of the Beni sub-tribe of the ancient Nupe. Before the Fulani conquest in the early nineteenth century, Bida was just a small walled town of the Beni. It was after 1856 that the Fulani conquerors made Bida the new capital of the kingdom, after they had restored to power with the protection and help of Bida inhabitants to fight against the usurper (Ismaila, 2002: 58-61). In 1857 when the British delegation visited Bida, it was still a temporary war camp with an estimated population of 12,000 and most of the people lived in grass houses (Mason, 1981:73). From about 1860 during the reign of the second *Emir*, Masaba, Bida was transformed from a war camp into a fine capital city, and since then had become the political and cultural center of the Nupe even until today.

Changes brought by the Fulani conquerors have shaped the history of the rural communities in Cis-Kaduna region of the Bida Emirate. As one of the most intense battle-fields, there was serious bloodshed in Bida and its surrounding regions. After years of wars and rebellions, many indigenes were displaced, captured and killed. In order to hide from the warriors, some indigenes moved their settlements to different places, and some even hid on top of hills where living condition was very harsh (Masuda, 2002: 255). On the other hand, many new villages were established by new comers brought by the Fulani conquerors. In the conquest of Nupe country, the Fulani royal family appropriated three categories of tribal land: all no-man's land between villages; all village land which had been lying fallow for long; and finally the land reserve of some villages. These lands were basically divided up geographically between the three royal houses. Of the land owned by the royal houses by the right of conquest, the *Emir* or royal princes of highest rank bestowed parcels of land as fiefs on their followers, such as military leaders, members of the nobility, mallams or servants of high status, for the services rendered. These fief holders mostly lived in the capital and never worked their land themselves. They settled their slaves on it, and had it worked by their labor (Nadel, 1942: 195-199).

During the reigns of early Fulani *Emirs*, slave was the dominant force of production and slave raiding expeditions were carried out frequently. Slaves were captured from anywhere most importantly for the annual tribute to be submitted to the overlord in Gwandu<sup>6</sup>, and when there were excess slaves, they could be traded to the coast from the ports on River Niger (Mason, 1981, 71-113). Many slaves were also put to farm and work for the Fulani aristocrats. They were settled by fiefholders on their lands surrounding Bida and made to farm. These slave villages were called *tunga* (Nadel, 1942: 36, 196). Under slavery crops produced in *tunga* were mostly extracted by fiefholders, and a portion was in turn to be submitted to the Fulani royal houses as tribute. There were a lot of *tunga* villages being established especially during the reign of Masaba. In order to pay the British for the guns and powders traded, Masaba imposed taxes on

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<sup>6</sup> Masaba had to send 300 slaves to Gwandu as annual tributes. By 1867 the number of slaves requested increased to 400 (Mason, 1981: 90).

his vassals, mostly in the form of Shea butter obtained from *tunga*. In addition, as other emirates exchanged slaves for the guns and powders re-exported from Bida, these slaves were also made to fill newly founded *tunga*. It was recorded that Masaba had established 694 *tunga* during his reign (Mason, 1981, 85-94). In Umaru Majigi's reign the slave population settled in *tunga* still increased in a high annual rate (Ibid: 113). It was uncertain when slavery was actually abolished in the Nupe kingdom, but it was probably during the British colonization that slavery gradually ended.

There was another type of *tunga* villages which were founded by dependents of fiefholders. When fiefholders no longer needed soldiers for their private armies, and when they could no longer support a large household of henchmen and hangers-on in the town, they offered their lands to their followers. In some cases, they even settled some of their family members. These new settlers went out into the fiefs of their patrons and founded new farm settlements. These settlements scattered all over Cis-Kaduna and many of them were named after their landlords. The economic arrangement between fiefholder and dependents whom he settled on his land was on metayer system which also regulated the tenantry of the free peasant who accepted clientship in order to obtain land (Nadel, 1942: 195-199; Adeniyi, 1972b). The history of the Fulani conquest and the founding of many settlements by migrants, either by slaves captured somewhere or by new coming dependents of fiefholders, explained the background for the higher population density of the Cis-Kaduna region as compared with the rest of the Emirate.

## **2. Customary land tenure of rural community in Cis-Kaduna**

Land ownership in the Cis-Kaduna region is complicated due to the history of the Fulani conquest. Nadel (1942: 180-256) offered a detailed description on the traditional land possession and distribution in the Nupe kingdom. The Cis-Kaduna region is mostly a "conquered territory", except some scattered islands of land that have not been taken away from the Nupe indigence. On the land that has been appropriated by the conquerors, multiple layers of ownership would exist as land got divided among the royal families, distributed to men high on the hierarchical scale, redistributed to dependents and slaves, sublet to settlement heads, and so on. The common situation can be simplified into a three-layered structure of land ownership (Masuda, 2002).

On the top level there are the *Bida Emir* and the three royal families. During the process of conquest, the lands were appropriated and divided between the three royal houses. The *Bida Emir* and the three royal families are the ultimate land owners of the territory of the Bida Emirate. There are three royal estates situated immediately outside the Bida town, which used to be overseen by the royal head slaves. In the past, the first cultivation in the year was always done by large-scale communal labor of slaves, dependents and farmers from the neighborhood. At present the use of communal labor of farmers from the neighborhood still occasionally happens when intensive work is needed for the royal farm. Following the tradition, the *Emir* has to arrange for plenty of good food for the people who contribute to the communal work. By being the ultimate land owner, the *Bida Emir* has the right to control activity on the territory of

the Emirate and has the judicial power over any land related dispute. The second layer of land ownership is the primary landlords which consist of absentee or sometimes resident landlords. The absentee landlords form the privileged class of town Fulani in Bida. They get bestowed permanent right to their fiefs and traditional title from the royal houses. Powerful absentee landlord would own large parcel of land that covers multiple farming settlements. The resident landlord probably originated from old slaves or dependents of the noble class, and they lead the life as land holding farmers.

On the third layer there are the secondary landlords who manage land at community level. They are the lineal descendants of the village founders and often also the village chiefs. In some cases, they can be the descendants of head slaves or dependents of former *tunga* villages that we have described in the former section. Following the abolishment of slavery and a century of political change, the economic relationship between *tunga* and fiefholders has changed. Unlike in the time of slavery when most of the crops produced were extracted by the landlords, former slaves were freed and allowed to remain on the land and to farm for their own. The right of secondary landlords to the land is bounded by the clientship under the primary landlord. Annual tribute in kind must be paid by a secondary landlord to show the acknowledgement of the dependence of the community on the patron.

The power of secondary landlords over the community land is restricted to allocation of farmland and management of vacant land. His power, however, can be overridden by the primary landlord. When a primary landlord wants to take back the land for his own use, or to shift the secondary landownership to another person, the secondary landlord can do nothing but to obey. This lack of exclusive right to the land can sometimes lead to hardship to farmers of the community. To ordinary farmers, it is the secondary landlord that they have to deal with when acquiring farmland. Secondary landlords enjoy the economic privilege, although nothing big, to receive land rent in kind from tenant farmers. The land rent is known as *dzanka*, an Arabic-Hausa word meaning tithe, a religious obligation for a Muslim to give out of his wealth or farm products in a prescribed portion with sincere and pious intention of giving. In principle, a tenant farmer in the Cis-Kaduna region is supposed to submit one tenth of his production, in terms of bundles of sorghum or millet, or tins of rice, to the secondary landlord of his farmland. The secondary landlords can also derive income from some fruit-bearing trees on the land.

Table 2 lists the population, origin and primary land ownership of some of the Nupe villages I have visited. These twenty-five villages scatter over the Cis-Kaduna region and are about 10 to 30km away from Bida town. Villages in Cis-Kaduna are often small in scale, with an estimated population not more than two hundred. Out of these twenty-five villages, sixteen are founded by migrants. I will quote some examples that I have got from the oral history of Nupe that I have interviewed. When Shabamaliki village was founded, a hundred young men and a hundred young women captured as slaves were brought to settle in a virgin forest which later turned into Shabamaliki. Ancestor of Nassarafu was an Islamic preacher from Borno who followed the Fulani warriors down to the Nupeland. Similarly, ancestors of Kpatagi were originally from Sokoto. Today it is difficult to tell whether these villages are founded by former slaves or

by dependents of the Fulani conquerors, because nowadays there is almost no difference among villages regardless of their background. Most of the young farmers do not even know the origin of their ancestors. As Adeniyi (1980) has pointed out, there is the tendency for smaller tribes to be absorbed by larger or ruling tribes. After the passage of a century of time, decedents of the former migrants have already been “Nupe-ized” and embraced the Nupe language and culture. The process of islamization brought by the Fulani conquerors should have accelerated the abandonment of their original cultural traits. It is only when one digs deep into the oral history and the land ownership that one can find hints on the origin of the village ancestors. These villages are not very far away from each other, but within a rather limited area of land, numerous primary landlords exist. It reflects the history of land division resulted from the land appropriation and distribution brought by the conquerors. Powerful title holders like *Natsu* and *Tsoyida* own large parcel of land that cover the boundary of multiple villages.

For the villages with Nupe indigence originality, the founders of these villages were usually chased to be the hunters that when wandered around seeking for animals found the unoccupied lands and then settled down. During the Fulani conquest, some indigenes moved into the protection of the hill-side in order to escape from the Fulani raiders. The tradition of Kuchiworo village can be an interesting case as it is a typical instance at first but an unusual instance later. According to the oral history of the village head, the great ancestor of Kuchiworo was a hunter originally lived in Rotso, a place nearby Lokoja which was about 300km away from Bida. He wandered around hunting and as he moved, he settled in a number of places and founded hamlets. From Rotso he moved to Gbanguba, then to Fitigi and finally reached Kuchiyabata. When the Fulani conquerors came, some inhabitants of Kuchiyabata moved onto the hill to hide from the warriors. They endured the harsh living environment there for some decades and finally moved away from the hill when Christian missionary came to them, probably in the late nineteenth century. However, as they were Christianized, they could not return to the original village as it has been Islamized after the conquest. They therefore needed to beg for land from a Fulani landlord and established a new village called Kucuiworo, in which “*woro*” means new in Nupe language. Meanwhile some other inhabitants of Kuchiyabata moved to another place and founded another new village called Kuchigbako, in which “*gbako*” means old in Nupe language. It is the history of how one village has splatted into three due to the war.

**Table 2. Population, origin and primary land ownership of Nupe villages.**

	Village	Population*	Origin	Primary Landlord	Traditional title of primary landlord
1	Alukusu Tako	150	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Tsoyida
2	Alukusu Tifin	50	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Tsoyida
3	Ejeti	200	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Shabama Mamudu
4	Emicheche	100	Indigene	Nupe landlord in another community	Kuchiyabata
5	Emigbari	50	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Tutiginba
6	Emigilali	100	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Natsu
7	Emisheshe Natsu	60	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Natsu
8	Emisheshikacha	50	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Nynadalu
9	Emitete	100	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Nakordi
10	Emitsundadan	177	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Daniya
11	Eyagi	86	Indigene	Nupe indigene	
12	Fikin	200	Indigene	Nupe indigene	
13	Fitigi	100	Indigene	Nupe indigene	
14	Gadza	303	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlords	Tsoyida/Natsu
15	Gbranchitako	100	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlords	Etsu Umaru
16	Kpatagi	200	Migrant	Absentee landlord in Bida	
17	Kuchigbako	100	Indigene	Nupe indigene	
18	Kuchiworo	200	Indigene	Fulani absentee landlord	Ejiko
19	Lemuta	80	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlords	Gbate
20	Mokwagi	100	Indigene	Nupe indigene	
21	Nassarafu	500	Migrant	Absentee landlord in Bida	
22	Patinda	200	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Rani
23	Shabamaliki	400	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Nagenu
24	Takunkabagi	100	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Ejiko
25	Tswatagi	100	Migrant	Fulani absentee landlord	Rani
	<i>Average</i>	<i>152</i>			

\* Numbers of population were given by village heads or villagers interviewed. Most of the figures were rough estimations which seemed to be higher than the real figures could be. The population of Emigbari, Emitsundadan and Gadza were carefully counted by the author through detailed interviews.

Source: Produced by author based on fieldwork conducted in 2004-2009.



## Discussion

This paper is part of a larger study which is conceived as an effort to examine the community economy and the indigenous development initiatives of the Nigerian rural community. Various works have already been drafted and published, yet it still requires a constant huge effort to make the history and circumstances of the rural Nigerian community more accessible to reader (Fu et al, 2009; Fu, 2013, 2018, 2019). Comprehensive study on the Nigerian society has become rare since the late 1980s due to increasing political instability and deteriorating social environment after the oil boom. After Nadel's (1942) research in the 1930s, the Nupe society have not been studied again for over half a century until the Japanese scholars conducted research on them in the mid-1990s. Decades have passed since Nadel's research and the Nupe society have undergone some changes. As a part of a research project to identify the possibility for inland valley farming intensification, a Nupe village called Gadza has been selected for socio-economic observation. Hirose (2002) analyzed its farming system and Masuda (2002) studied its land tenure system and tree distribution. Under the same project, Shikano (2002) conducted the first ethnographic research on the pastoral Fulani in the Nupe country. Their findings provide important background information for my study. A rich amount of first hand materials have been obtained through a prolonged period of interrupted fieldwork since 2004. This paper provides the record of the historical origin and customary land tenancy of the agricultural villages of Nigeria. Despite its importance as the political and economic giant of the emerging Africa, information on its local society is limited. Efforts will continue to reveal more detailed descriptions of selected villages, so that the information gap since Nadel's time, even though limited maybe due to various difficulties faced by the researcher, will be filled.

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