

ADVANCING THE NUPE LANGUAGE

NCFI Interview with
AMB. SOLOMON YISA

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NCFI Communications: We thank God and appreciate you. We note you are an Author of many books, particularly of the Nupe Dictionary. On behalf of the Nupe Christian Fellowship International (NCFI) website communications it is a privilege to meet with you today for this special interview in commendation of your dictionary in Nupe language.



Ambassador Solomon Yisa

NCFI Communications: *We will appreciate if you can kindly give us a little background about yourself, particularly in the areas of education, work experience and those who influenced you while growing up.*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: You are welcome to my humble abode. I was born 74 years ago in Egbe, Gbako Local Government, but I am an indigene of Kutigi. My father was a pastor, ministering at Egbe at the time I was born. I schooled in St John's Primary School, Bida, thereafter attended St Paul's College, Zaria, and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where I graduated with a Degree in Chemistry. I also pursued a degree in Master of Education but I didn't finish. That is a story for another day. I found the experience I got while learning in school very useful and it became part of my life. After graduation from the university, I chose to teach rather than go into any lucrative industry, which would have offered me huge salary.

I became a school Principal, then Commissioner for Education, Commerce and Finance. I moved on to

become the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the United Republic of Tanzania and Seychelles. When I came back from Tanzania after 4 years, I retired to private life in 1991. Between then and now I have picked up little appointments, representing the government and serving as Chairman or a member in some of the Boards of the State and Federal Governments Parastatals. The most recent and very important one being the Bida Basin Committee that was set up to establish the fact that there is crude oil in the basin. Though the Committee has been disbanded the effort is still on going. That was my last involvement with government. Currently, I am on my own pursuing the second volume of the Nupe dictionary, which is the essence of our discussion today.

With regards to those who influenced my growing up, my Primary School teachers, particularly the one that sponsored my secondary school education. In fact, he amazed me because I didn't know he was paying my school fees until five years after I have left secondary school. He told my parents not to allow me to know about it. Since then, I have not forgotten the fact that people help you without you knowing. Thus, you too do not have to make noise in helping people when you have to do so. It is like people sing praises by saying a person is a good philanthropist, etcetera. And there are others who have made me to appreciate life, but I don't want to name them, as they are too many.

NCFI Communications: *Thank you very much sir. What motivated you to write the Nupe Dictionary?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: About 13 years ago I have to do cataract surgery on my left eye. After the surgery, the surgeon instructed me, that for the next ten days, I should keep my eyes looking straight, not to look down, or sideways and not to play golf. I could not imagine myself to strictly keep to the surgeon's instruction. Furthermore, a few weeks earlier, my daughter who was in the law school in Lagos, asked me for the meaning of her name. The reason being that in the law school in Lagos she was surrounded by people with Yoruba names, such as Oluwatelaye, Bukola, Kinde that have meanings. One of her classmates asked her what is the meaning of her name and she could not explain. So, she called and

asked me to explain the meaning of her name. I said I do not know, but that she was named after the lady who looked after my father from childhood to adulthood.

Consequently, I gave myself ten days to do research on my daughter's quest. As the research progressed, I kept my eyes straight and continue to write at the same time. Within those ten days, from the sheet of paper I start to write increased to over 90 pages with Nupe names that I do not know the meanings. I saw myself with a potential dictionary. That is how I started the dictionary and produced the first draft. Before I got to the final draft, a non-Nupe man saw it and said this is brilliant, why don't you make it a heritage dictionary. I said heritage means talking about the Nupe people and history. I agreed and said this will include Nupe past leaders whose names are everyday references in our hearts. I completed and published the first edition of the Nupe Dictionary, which is now available to readers. However, I am revising it to produce an improved version.

NCFI Communications: *How do you think this Nupe Dictionary will help the Nupe language generally?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: Well, every written material will always be useful for education and for research. So many things about the Nupe people and Nupe land prompted me to write this dictionary. Therefore, it will not only be useful as an educational material but more importantly to advance Nupe language in future.

NCFI Communications: *What were the main challenges you faced in writing the Nupe language dictionary?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: As I did not start with research but mainly responding to my daughter's quest, it was difficult to know the meaning of some words or expressions in Nupe. You have to go beyond your thinking, ask other people and to that extent, any time I go home, I go with a piece of paper and biro to capture more words that I have not heard before as people speak the language. Also, I try to give real meaning to what is written or spoken as some times the words and expressions do not mean anything.

These are the challenges I had in producing the Nupe language dictionary.

NCFI Communications: *Sir, before and immediately after the independence in 1960 the churches in Nupe land introduced Prima and booklets or pamphlets that propagate Nupe language. What do you think is the relevance of these booklets in Nupe language today?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: When I was growing up in the village, they had one prima, which was one sheet of paper. It was like a slate then. It was enough for them to use in teaching the Nupe language just like the Islamic Scholars use a slate with signs to teach Arabic. We learned Nupe language using the language signs or alphabets on the slate. While Islamic scholars were teaching for people to understand Arabic, we were learning those booklets to enable us read and understand the Nupe Bible. Beyond those initial stages, we are producing new prima currently. As the Director of Nupe Cultural and Resource Centre, I discovered that if we are going to promote the Nupe language, we have to go beyond the Christian prima to materials non-Christians can also use.



Ambassador Solomon Yisa

There is the Nupe Language Committee that the Etsu Nupe set up and was chaired by late Professor Abu Tswanya, currently being chaired by retired Air Commodore Peter Gana. The Committee is a long list of very capable Nupe people, consisting of Christians, Muslims and even Pagan. The Committee decided to harmonize the existing Prima, that is, both the Christian and Non-Christian ones. Hence, we now have the draft of the new Prima. A few copies were sent to College of Education, Minna where the Nupe

language has been introduced as a course of study. The new effort makes us jump from the 1960s to the present day, that is, into 21st century.

NCFI Communications: *Does that mean you are part of the move to establish the Nupe language course at Niger State College of Education (COE)?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: I would not say that the Nupe Language Committee is responsible for introducing it in COE. It was initially planned to start the Nupe language course in Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida University (IBBU) Lapai at the time Prof. Kolo was the Vice Chancellor. However, the Committee gave it a deeper thought and approached College of Education, Minna. The provost of the College was very accommodating and accepted the request. Consequently, the College flagged off the program as a substantive Nupe language Course.

Let me add that the Federal Government of Nigeria has the policy of getting children educated in their mother tongue. Therefore, if there are no teachers to teach the language it becomes a problem. We have to train teachers to teach Nupe so that it will not be difficult for students to learn in the classroom. We have to provide the materials and facilities to make that possible. And as responsible people, we thought if government could not rise up to the expectation, we will do so ourselves.

NCFI Communications: *What would you consider as a threat to the existence of Nupe language.*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: Well, it is as difficult as we choose to make it. If government is ready to make it possible then, there shouldn't be any problems. But if government is going to make it difficult then, there will be problems. That is why we started with COE at this initial stage. Generally, I do not see any problem if the will is there. Like you people are here now for this interview, you make it possible. By the time people start seeing this interview on television, or social media or on the website, government may be prompted to take action. I do not want to talk of what other tribes are doing, but take the case of the Yorubas, they do not joke at all with learning their language. The Yoruba people give support and the government always take action. But with our people, the Nupes, I am sorry to say, we do not give that kind

of push. If there is any threat, we the Nupes are couraging the problem as we do not push enough.

NCFI Communications: *Looking at our society today with regards to Nupe language most of the youth, especially those whose parents live in the cities speak mainly English, Hausa and other languages but not Nupe. What will be your advice?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: It is not peculiar to Nupe language alone. Some people speak mainly Hausa and Arabic, though the practice in Arabic is associated with the language of a particular religion. People want to be able to speak it very fluently and then quote passages from the scriptures. However, most of the time people have to go to the professional Arabic speakers to know the meaning. Furthermore, I know that there is a write up about the Igbo language that in another thirty years, it may become extinct. The reason being that many parents do not speak the language anymore to their children. But for me and my household I make sure Nupe language is the language in the house first and foremost. When my children go to school, they learn the other languages but speak Nupe in the house.

NCFI Communications: *So, your advice to parents is that they should encourage the children to speak and use Nupe language consistently.*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: Yes, not just the Nupe language, there are certain little things we are missing out from our culture. When children gather up to play in those old days, there are certain things like tale by moonlight and rhythms in the language. When we were growing up as young people, we learnt several things though we may not know all that they mean. At the end of the day the tales educate you. But now when you give such tales the children will just be looking at you as one that is not making any sense. Unfortunately, even the parents do not know if local stories and rhythms in Nupe would be good later in life of the children. But with this kind of program of Nupe Christian Fellowship we can begin to teach some of the Nupe rhythms. And then, our Nupe musicians can contribute through the short songs for children. NCFI can also make special program for kids. All these will go a long way to interest and help the children.

NCFI Communications: *When you were telling us about what inspired you to start writing the Nupe dictionary, it was very inspiring. So, what in your opinion are the elements for good writing in Nupe language?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: There is a Nupe proverb that says, there are people who like hot pap, some like it cold, others like to swallow, and it is just to service the stomach. A tree cannot make a forest and all languages borrow from each other. When you go to Nupe land, you have Dibo, Kakanda and many other dialects. Even within Bida city, you have three sectors, you have the traders with language different from the royal group language. And then the ordinary citizens from outside the city gate or rural areas that have their own variety of Nupe language. The important thing is that people communicate with each other, therefore, there should not be any condemnation of one against the other. For instance, there is this fellow with PhD, who wrote an article that says “words that are wrongly used in Nupe language.” Such a person should not be misinforming people about Nupe language. There is nothing wrong in promoting the Nupe language but do it properly. There are different words used, but often they mean the same thing. Take for example, in spoken Nupe there is a town some people call Lemu and others call it Eboagi, but they refer to the same town. The same goes for places like Sonkpata and Kuchi. Similarly, in some places people refer to the rabbit as kaigi and others call it karigi. Also, while some call local trap as tangi, others call it tiangi, but they mean the same thing.

To make things better, we should get the people who want to establish instructional institutes to come together. The group should listen to what our people use to communicate and thereafter project to others who want to learn the language appropriately.

NCFI Communications: *Are there people you consider as your hero in terms of spoken and written Nupe language?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: For the spoken Nupe, the Nupe drummers or praise singers are my heroes because they know and speak the language without any mixture of anything, that is, very authentic language. In similar vein, the Nupe Language Committee is

trying to pick all the little herbs of the language, and then put them together and serve it to the general public. So, I do not have any individual as my hero. Those that I think are heroes are not alive. Nupe language heroes are the original drummers, not the ones that go to the royal palaces to play verbal ululations. The language committee wants to rekindle interest in Nupe language, with the people who can replace the language heroes that are disappearing fast.

NCFI Communications: *Tell us more about how many books you have published and how many you are still working on at present.*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: I am not a writer per se, I just compiled what others have written as is the case of the Nupe Language Dictionary. I am happy that the Harvard University has accepted the dictionary as a copy in their library. I am working on the English to Nupe dictionary, unlike the published one that is Nupe to English. I thought the English to Nupe is going to be easy but it turns out to be more difficult. We are almost through with the English to Nupe version and will soon be ready for publication. The Nupe to English version that is already published are giving out free to people.

I am aware dictionary is not available to the public at present. However, somebody has encouraged me to put it on the website unrevised for people to access. Also, I want to revise it and when the second book, that is, English to Nupe is published, the two will be uploaded on a website. I know the students at COE would want copies of the books. Meanwhile the remaining copies were given to the students without asking them for money.

NCFI Communications: *Writing a dictionary takes time and a lot of efforts. Did your family members support you in doing this work?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: Of course, they do and I appreciate them. I have my study room. But because people come in the day time to see me, I actually start my writing work at 9 pm and close at 4 am every day because that is when you can concentrate. There are many little things when it comes to lexicography that requires undistracted concentration. For instance, when you write something and you forget one

comma it changes the structure of the sentence. These are the kind of things in the Nupe Dictionary, so it requires serious concentration.

NCFI Communications: *Did you get any feedback or support from people that read the dictionary? Have you lunched it on the internet?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: Interviewee response: No official feedback yet and it is not officially lunched in the internet. I did initial lunching of the dictionary in 2013. It was a non-Nupe person, that is, General T. Y. Danjuma that gave massive support to the project. Though none since 2013, the hope is that the State Government may give support in the future. Also, the Nupe people are yet to give necessary support.

Sometimes one feels some people simply want to sabotage our effort in advancing Nupe language. No other explanations seem reasonable. This is unlike what happens in other cultures in Nigeria. For example, to make a documentary on cultural drums in Yoruba land the Oba of the area provided support and brought a foreigner to coordinate the effort and it yielded results. In our case, if one attempts such cultural documentation of the local Nupe community there is the tendency to religionize it and say “emi na wun a lo” that is, the person making the effort will go to hell. Such outright connotations tend to discourage me, but it pushed me to do in-depth research on the religions of our people before the advent of Christianity and Islam. I was amazed by what I found. The findings made me to have decided to follow the traditions of our people.

NCFI Communications: *There is nothing wrong when such findings on our people are also published.*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: Sure, there is nothing wrong in publishing such research findings. However, when I started working on the second volume of the Nupe dictionary, I thought I will finish it in six months, but it is now three years and I have not finished. I have a stack of manuscript I need to follow in completing the new volume. And there are other things you have to consider. One has to be careful when you dig deep into people’s culture. There was a time I was warned not to dig too deep into the culture as it relates to

language. When you dig too deep, you wait for the people’s reaction. That is the fact of the matter.

NCFI Communications: *From the work you have done, have you achieved any success? And were there any surprises?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: Success is a relative thing. I borrow from the scriptures; it is like sowing the mustard seed. If you do not sow it at all, you may not see the success, but if you sow the seed today you may see the success tomorrow. People are already asking “where can I get a copy of the dictionary?” The challenge is that as you try to water the seedling a lot of people will make sure that the water is acidic and kill it. Therefore, one must watch out for such people. Like the scripture says, don’t allow the left hand to see what the right hand is doing and that applies to this work we are doing.

Well, surprises spring up every day. My attention suddenly was brought to the forces of the supernatural. These forces exist and are there to confront you as you continue writing. This is the major surprising thing so far. At this present age I cannot pretend that they are not there. I cannot hide behind any religious doctrine that says the forces are not there. However, God Almighty will always open your eyes to see what you can see and what you must not see and also provide you the way forward. That has been my experience.

NCFI Communications: *Considering the lack of sufficient support from prominent Nupes to development to our environment, what advice will you give to encourage the younger generation for a change for better future.*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: I observe that the Nupe people who prosper or is high positions tend to serve other masters. They are not serving themselves and they do not want to serve the people to whom they belong. This is why politically we find it difficult to bring out a representative on very simple issues. I don’t want to go into politics but that is the problem. They emerge into position and they are serving others not even themselves. They do what their pay masters say. I know of a book that was to be lunched. These people came and cleared all the copies. It has never been seen again.

NCFI Communications: *On the issue of introducing Nupe Language course in COE, will it not be difficult to get people to go and learn Nupe dialect in the college as it is not being taught in primary and secondary schools. Is it part of the programme to now introduce the teaching of Nupe in Primary and Secondary schools?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: The COE effort is to teach the teachers of Nupe language, who will in turn teach at lower levels. The trained teachers will acquire the technical knowledge of Nupe language. I recall when the Government started most of the Islamic institutions, for instance, when I was in Agaie as school Principal as far back as 1977, they sent to me an Islamic teacher who didn't understand English but speaks Nupe and Arabic only. We found it difficult during staff meetings to communicate as we have to translate to him. So, if government can do that for Arabic language studies, why can't we do the same for Nupe language. But we want to make the case of Nupe better. For example, if there are thirty students in COE being trained in Nupe language, and on completion of their studies they are distributed to thirty different primary schools, they will be like mustard seeds and begin to spread the learning of Nupe to other schools. We just have to start somewhere. If we have started the teaching of Nupe long time ago, we would have been talking at a higher level now.

NCFI Communications: *Do you have anybody you are mentoring to possibly take over from you to continue and sustain advancing Nupe language when you are no more?*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: When I was writing the draft of the second volume, I had a gentleman from Patigi that was assisting to review it. There was also another person and they make up the two reviewers. But when the person from Patigi was going through the draft, and got to the letter K, he said to me that he cannot continue as he could not open any page from that point. That was the time I was having physical challenges as I indicated earlier. Note that he is older than me and has been in the development of Nupe language for a long time. That brings me to the issue of mentorship. I am looking for somebody who can continue the work. I have discovered two

persons, but their idea of Nupe language is confusing. Whatever the case, I am working on mentoring people to continue where I may stop.

NCFI Communications: *Sir, before we close, do you have any advice and any other things you want the world to know about Nupe language.*

Amb. Solomon Yisa: Some time ago, when the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) did an interview on Nupe drumming, I said that if we can get some of the old Nupe drummers, there is a lot of language loaded in the drumming. I have a documentary of 1000 Nupe drums, which I want to produce. In it there is drumming that will embody Nupe language both spiritual and cultural as well as at all levels. If we can get people to learn in Nupe, it is not necessary for a person to know how to play the drums, people should just appreciate the culture of Nupe drummer to help learn and understand the language. When you here the drummer speaking in the poetic language, you are carried away in appreciation of what is being said. The drummer can advance Nupe language for future generations.

NCFI Communications: Thank you very much Ambassador. On behalf of the Nupe Christian Fellowship International, the Website Committee, we are sincerely grateful and appreciate your taking time to have this conversation. God bless you and your work.



Prof. Daniel N. Tsado and Evangelist Zacchaeus B. Gana in conversation with Amb. Solomon Yisa, December 2021