The Name Ningi and Developing Pre-Colonial Citizenship:
A 'Non-Tribal' Perspective in Nineteenth Century Hausaland

by Adell Patton, Jr.

In the course of the nineteenth century, dissident Kano mallamai (religious practitioners and teachers) organized non-Muslim mountaineers into revolt against the Sokoto Caliphate, culminating in the establishment of the Ningi Chiefdom ca. 1847. The mountaineers of Ningi resisted successfully the emirates of Bauchi, Kano, Zazzau, and a number of others down to 1902, when the British defeated them. Their social structures consisted of numerous small scale patrilineal and heterogeneous societies, and the linguistic classifications of the people were as equally diverse. For the most part scholars neglected these societies in northern Nigeria — with emirate formation studies receiving due attention — and in the few references to them in print, the "Ningi tribe" or "Ningi pagans" finds expression as a territorial unit. The writer was asked about a "Ningi religion" during the course of research. This interpretive essay is an attempt to put the "Ningi" nomenclature into proper perspective because of errors by early ethnographers and observers in northern Nigeria in tagging people casually with "tribal" names. This has happened elsewhere in Africa and greater care must be exercised in this regard, especially when dealing with little known people.

The origin of the word "Ningi" appears problematic and in the early literature writers linked "Ningi" to a spoken language and "tribe" by that name. The Kano Chronicle contains the earliest reference to some of the people and territory but the word Ningi is not mentioned. There are references to the "Warji" (Warjawa) in the

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1 The research for this paper was funded by the Foreign Area Research Program from July 1972 to January 1974 in northern Nigeria, and based on my dissertation: "The Ningi Chiefdom and the African Frontier: Mountaineers and Resistance to the Sokoto Caliphate, ca 1800–1908" (Ph. D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1975), and expressed henceforth as Patton, Thesis. This paper was originally presented at the Southeastern Regional Seminar in African Studies, October 1976, VPI, Blacksburg, Virginia. I wish to thank both Malam Ibrahim Mukoshy, Professors Patrick Bennet and William A. Brown for valuable linguistic suggestions to this paper. I wish to express a special thanks with the usual disclaimer.
If Ningi had been in existence at that time, it would most likely have been remembered by those involved in the flow of Rimfa’s innovations and thus would have appeared in the literature. Not even in the nineteenth century travelers’ accounts was the area between Kano and Bauchi defined. Dr. Eduard Vogel was not only the first European traveler to visit the region in 1855, but he also produced the earliest map of the area, showing only such place names as Jucoba (Bauchi), Salia (Zaria), Gongola (Kuka), Tsad (Chad), Schari (Chari), and a few other places. And later travelers left no better description of the Ningi territory. Paul Newman suggests hypothetically that travelers did not mention Ningi in their accounts because Ningi (or Nungu) was simply the name of the small village of that name inhabited by Butawa (or Kudawa) that existed before the mallamai arrived on the scene. The name was never mentioned in early writings because the village was too small and unimportant to be worth mentioning. It was only with the arrival of the Hausa in the nineteenth century during the successful opposition to establish rule that people began to hear about Ningi. As a geographical entity, however, Ningi appeared for the first time on a European map of the area in 1905.

A more recent study of events in Hausaland by Mervyn Hiskett shows a map of Ningi as a demarcated territory as far back as 1812 but obviously this is without foundation.

In a 1919 publication, C. L. Temple was probably the first to make note about a “Ningi language” and “Ningi tribe.” District officers collected the ethnographic and historical data in their divisions but most lacked training for this task. Since so little has been written about Ningi even up to the present time, Temple’s reliance upon improperly trained political staff laid the framework on which future scholars would view and draw conclusions of their data on Ningi. This also holds true for other similar societies in northern Nigeria. Through the process of language shifting, according to Temple, the Ningi language was being replaced by the spread of Hausa and that as few as 3,700 spoke the language at that time. Temple suggested further a close affinity — supposedly cultural — between the Ningi people and others such as the Warjawa, Afawa (Pa’aws), Kudawa (Chamawa and Basawa) and the Butawa, all living in the Ningi Division. He referred to the Sirawa as Maguzawa who also lived in Ningi. In two later volumes, C. K. Meek continued the “tribal” approach in his anthropological collection.

Through the use of some unpublished materials and correspondence in 1956, Harold D. Gunn imposed upon the existing ethnographic data and generally refers only to “Ningi,” the “Ningi bush” or the “Ningi plateau.” Hence, from earlier writers and Gunn, who did not discredit but encouraged the Ningi “tribal perspective,” the “Ningi tribal” nomenclature now appears in more recent literature. Writing in 1967 about Ningi’s nineteenth century location, H. A. S. Johnson said: “In the first half of the century the Ningi people were no more than a tribe [sic] inhabiting an area between Kano, Zaria and Bauchi emirates.” Jean-Claude Froelich cited “Ningi” as a separate “tribe” a year later while making a distinction between the Butawa

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and Kudawa. Hence, earlier contributors to the ethnology on the mountaineers left many questions unanswered.

It is from an indigenous writer that a “non-tribal” perspective emerges on the origin of “Ningi” which was overlooked by previous writers. Although the conclusions reached lack historical validity, the approach does not link “Ningi” to “tribe” or “language”. Malam Abdulkadir Akabi reports an oral version that “Ningi” was the name of a very skillful hunter and knowledgeable about the whereabouts of game refuge places for protection against raids. As a hunter, “Ningi” was also a warrior whose skills proved valuable to the dissident Hausa mallamai; for the most part because of their plains existence, they lacked familiarity with mountain ecology and warfare, and asked for “Ningi’s” help toward the mid-nineteenth century. Following the death of “Ningi”, the oral version goes, the mallamai named the capital of their chiefdom “Ningi” as a befitting memorial. This hunter’s image in Hausa-lore is frequent; and in this beneficiary role analogous to the mythical origin of the hunter Mbegha among the Shambas in East African history, who laid the non-conquest foundation of the Shambaa Kingdom in nineteenth century.

But how does one explain the widespread usage of “Ningi” as the appropriate place-name for all the inhabitants of this area? “Ningi Old” was the pre-colonial and colonial headquarters of the chiefdom down to 1934, when the British moved the Hausawa to the new administrative center called Ningi Town. A more acceptable solution to the enigma of “Ningi” lies in the use of recent findings in oral history and linguistic analysis. This approach sheds new light on the irrelevance of the “tribal perspective” in African history and suggests the designated use of “people” in referring to the specific names of cultural units. One oral version recorded from an original inhabitant, a Buta, of “Ningi Old” holds that “Ningi” comes from the Hausa word Lungu, meaning “an out of the way corner, to hide, to conceal” or a “cubbyhole”. The use of the Hausa word suggests a nineteenth century derivation and that the original people who settled the area in remote times used another name for themselves. A second oral version reports that “Ningi” comes from “Nungu” [sic] of the Buta language. Hausa documents compiled by a Soviet scholar from the German archives show several references to “Ningi” with the word “Lingi”, which poses an even different problem.

Within the framework of theoretical possibilities, the appropriate stages in shifts were from “Lungu” to “Lingi”, and finally to “Ningi” within the environment from the mid-nineteenth century onward. In “Lungu”, the high back vowel u shifted to a high front vowel i to yield “Lingi” (u > i shift is not infrequent in Hausa). The shift from initial L to N is simply due to assimilation, resulting through time as a shift from “Lingi” to “Ningi”.

In the meantime, the comparative universality of the frontier process in history and its institutionalization in Ningi has been demonstrated elsewhere. Here, aspects of the frontier process are germane to this discussion. Hence, when the Hausa mallamai and their non-Muslim compatriots obtained horses; mounted them; and rode out of their natural walled mountain fortress of “Lungu” (ganuwa Allah, “the wall that Allah made”) for raids against the often unprotected plains of the Caliphate; and as the “warrior” designation of the raiders became known, “Ningi” became a place-name of common usage in the oral history within the Caliphate community. Through time, “Ningi” came to be applied inappropriately as descriptive of all the people of this plateau massif. And in an Arabic letter of ca. 1875 from Zazzau Emirate, “Ningi” found expression in writing possibly for the first time (see map page 246).

In efforts to assess why “Ningi” was not mentioned in Hausa documents found in the German archives, it is not certain whether the documents were written within Hausaland or outside of it. There exist references only to “Lingi” in either situation. Two possible reasons may be cited for “Lingi” in these documents. Either the authors

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12 Steven Feierman, The Shambaa Kingdom (Madison, 1974).
15 Commander of the army Uthman, son of the Emir of Zakzak, Abdullahi (1873-78) to Amir al-masālih wali al-masālih (Waziri of Sokoto) Abdulkadir (1874-86) ibn Gidado, ca. 1875, Kaduna, Nigeria, National Archives Kaduna, Zarpf vol I, Outward Correspondence, p. 27.
wrote the documents within the environment before leaving Hausaland. Second, possibly at this time Hausa was not written in Roman alphabet but in Arabic (ajami). Whoever the copyist, the word “Ningi” was there زنگنی, but the copyist in the process of transliteration — German or African — may have omitted the dot and it read L in “Lingi” and expressed زنگنی. Where “Ningi” is found, as in an Arabic letter of ca. 1875, the copyist asserted the dot and L became N.

In Hausa-lore, there is a tendency to give an additional name of title to a person based on position or occupation. Sarki, meaning “chief” in Hausa, is a common title followed by a more descriptive word, e.g. Sarkin Ayyuka literally meaning “the Chief of Public Works Agency”. From the example one can show when the word “Ningi” was first used among the Hausa mallamai in the mountain fortress of “Lungu”. Several oral versions hold that the nineteenth century frontier leaders of Ningi never called themselves Sarki or “Chief” but responded only to the Hausa word malam, meaning learned one:

1. Malam Hamza, ca. 1847–1849 (Founder of Chiefdom)
2. Malam Ahmadu, ca. 1850–1855
3. Malam Abubakar Dan Maje, ca. 1855–1870
4. Malam Haruna Karami, ca. 1870–1886
5. Malam Gajigi, ca. 1886–1889

As a title of respect, Sarkin Ningi (the Chief of Ningi) came into usage for the first time during the initial six years of the reign of Malam Haruna Karami (ca. 1870–86); thus, about 1875 and ironically, the title was given to the leader of the original Buta inhabitants called Mai Mada. The practice continued down to 1915 under colonial rule, when the British installed Malam Abdul — “the Messenger” — (1915–1921) as ruler of Ningi, and Abdul, then, took the title Sarkin Ningi away from the Mai Mada’s line and gave it to himself. From that time onward Mai Mada’s title became Sarkin
courts" with the presence of both ulama and non-Muslim authors enhanced further this process by not only the nominal conversion of a few indigenous leaders to Islam; but also by adjudication of legal matters toward a developing Alkali's court based on Sharia Law as practiced. However, the non-Muslims support of the Caliphate tax. As a minority, the Buta and "Ningi" languages were no longer viewed as separate languages but as one language belonging to the Buta people in Burra, in Dua, and the old capital of Ningi. The linguistic evidence in the second report concurs with the oral tradition. From the foregoing analysis, it is safe to assume that a "language" or "tribe" called Ningi never existed among the mountaineers in the nineteenth century; instead Ningi is rather comparable to "Kanawa", e.g. a name describing a political and geographical conglomerate of people of varied ethnic origins.

Thus, the present concept of a Ningi society in the state-nation of Nigeria had its origin in the pre-colonial past; and more research of this kind would be useful to governmental specialists on problems of national integration.

In 1972, the Institute of Linguistics, Zaria, prepared a Provisional Checklist of Nigerian Languages jointly with Ibadan University. Linguists made later revisions in this study in regard to even changes in the name of languages. For the approach in this paper, the first report stressed the separate nature of both Buta and "Ningi" languages. The second report added a new development: both Buta and "Ningi" were grouped under the sub-Benue-Congo of the Niger-Congo family of languages. Even more significant, Buta and "Ningi" languages were no longer viewed as separate languages but as one language belonging to the Buta people and representing the northernmost extension of the Benue-Congo language family. The differences were in dialects only as spoken by the Buta people in Burra, in Dua, and in the old capital of Ningi. The linguistic evidence in the second report concurs with the oral tradition. From the foregoing analysis, it is safe to assume that a "language" or "tribe" called Ningi never existed among the mountaineers in the nineteenth century; instead Ningi is rather comparable to "Kanawa", e.g. a name describing a political and geographical conglomerate of people of varied ethnic origins.

But the "non-tribal" perspective that emerged in Ningi was not peculiar to it, for a similar historical development occurred with the

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17 Madakin Kudu (Bawa Bu), age 83, interviewed at Ningi Town, Nigeria, December 6, 1973.

18 T. Morgan, "Pagan Administration, Ningi Division, 1934", National Archives Kaduna, Nigeria, 132 (Item No. 10) 231 D (Agency Number).

19 Patton, Thesis, chs. 3–5 and appendix Kano mallamai of Tsakuwa who came to Ningi, ca. 1846.


22 Provisional Checklist of Nigerian Languages, Comps. Institution of Linguistics, P. O. Box 489, Zaria, Nigeria (May-October 1972); also Neil Campbell and James Hoekison, "Bauchi Area Survey Report", Institute of Linguistics, Zaria, 1972; and Field Note Bk. #2 (8 March 1973).

23 Field Note Bk. #2 (8 March 1973).

24 Malam Mai Taba BaNingi (Tape No. 13, Side B); Paul Newman, Personal Communication, July 8, 1975 (Kano).
imposition in Sokoto rule in Hausaland about 1808. When Uthman Dan Fodio launched the jihad movement in 1804, he did so to establish an ideal government based on the Sharia representing a new society of Muslims and under a Muslim administration; for centuries Hausaland had been only nominally Muslim. This misapplication of the Sharia left no other alternatives to zealous movements but to overthrow the old independent Hausa regimes. It is now well known that Shaikh Uthman borrowed from the classical Islamic models as documented by Arab theorists, especially al-Mawardi, and based on the Law worked out by the Abbasid (762 A.D.—1258 A.D.) which, unlike its Umayyad predecessors, provided the respectful integration of its non-Arab subjects.

As it turned out in Sokoto, most of the rulers were Fulani. This happened because most of the jihad leaders were Fulani. But some non-Fulani participated also in the new scheme, such as the Hausa Malam Abd al-Salam, whose incarcerated followers and demand for freeing them influenced the timing of the Fulani in declaring jihad; further, Ya’qub ruled Bauchi Emirate and for a while, Jattau was Sarkin Zazzau. The Abd al-Salam later revolt appeared ethnically inspired; but now considered less so motivated by Caliphate scholars; and there was no other Hausa revolt of that magnitude in the nineteenth century.

Multiple dimensions of changing ideology were more significant for conflict in the rise of Sokoto and later developments than expressed ethnicity. Reformers based their appeals for support upon religious grounds rather than ethnic ones. Although few references were made to the “Hausa” or the “Sudanes” in the compiled list of jihad supporters, the absence of Hausa representation did not reflect bias on part of the Fulani but indicates only the need to be Muslim. Caliphate literature shows only a few references to national or ethnic origins.

That group feeling (asabiyah) existed in the Caliphate cannot be denied. It had become an institutionalized belief in the Islamic world, for earlier in the Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldun stressed that group feeling was indispensable for continuity in Islamic administration. The jihad scholars read the Muqaddimah, and realized the importance of group feeling in the maintenance of the Islamic reform character of the Caliphate. For they inherited a complex system with dissent from not only Hausa mallamai, such as Abd al-Salam of Arewa, or Hamza and others of Ningi, but from among the rank-and-file and blood of Sokoto, who functioned directly in the government. Hence, ideology overrode group feeling.

In 1807, Abdullahi b. Fodio — the younger brother of the Shaikh Uthman — became so disappointed with the progress of jihad and the Muslim community in general until he left Sokoto in hopes of reaching Mecca for Islamic purification. Kano officials detained him, where he wrote a treatise on government, and after reconciliation, he returned to Gwandu. The Caliphate, further, had to deal with the threats to internal security led by Fulani in the form of Mahdist movements; the 1873 case of Hayat b. Sa’id is well known in this regard, who was also a descendant of the Shaikh’s family. Caliph Umar b. Ali declared Hayat an outlaw, and warned that he was to be treated as any other infidel. In the 1890’s, Malam Jibril Gaini led a movement similar to Hayat’s and wrought havoc upon the eastern marshes of Gombe.

Since so few non-Fulani led revolts against the Caliphate, ethnicity cannot be used alone as a measuring rod for discontent in nineteenth century Hausaland. Although more research is needed in this direction, it seems for the moment that the degree upon which ethnic categories, Fulani, Hausa, and others, can be emphasized in the nineteenth century would depend upon the following variables: first, the relationship of the Hausa people to the Hausa governments of the pre-jihad centers; some supported the jihad in these centers and some did not; second, support either way was dependent upon previous connection with the Hausa government; if they were satisfied with the old Hausa government, they did not support the jihad; if not satisfied, they joined the jihad actively or took a noncommital stand.

Through attempts at the proper application of the Sharia, for there were always backsliders, and diffusion of Islamic institutions after 1808, the spirit of citizenship (Hausa, dan kasa, “son of the
land” or *dan gari*, “son of the town”, Arabic, *wataniyya*) spread throughout the heterogeneous Caliphate. As observed already, an analogous process model\(^{29}\) also took place in Ningi, Sokoto’s nineteenth century nemesis\(^{31}\)—laying a common bond, though unintended at the time, for national integration and solidarity while adding to the dynamics of Nigeria in the twentieth century.

Summary

Despite the opinion of numerous outside writers, the name Ningi in northern Nigeria is without a “tribal” significance. The “non-tribal” perspective first came from an indigenous author. Neither a Ningi “tribe” nor “language” ever existed. The people of Ningi consist of two linguistic groupings: the Butawa and Kudawa (Chamawa and Basawa) belong to the Benue-Congo linguistic family and represent its northernmost extension in the Jos Plateau massif; the Hausawa, Pa’awa, and Sirawa belong to the Chadic linguistic family. Recent linguistic analysis holds that what was previously considered a Ningi language was merely a dialect of Butanci. Hence, the name Ningi is derived from the Hausa word *lungu*, meaning “to hide” and initially the Ningi people used this name to describe the hideous mountain walled fortress (*ganuwa Allah*, “the wall that Allah made”) which came to be the capital of the nineteenth century Ningi Chiefdom.

Within the environment there were gradual linguistic shifts from \(L\) (“Lungu” to “Lingi”) to \(N\), which are not infrequent in Hausa, culminating in Ningi. During the 1870’s, Ningi became a household word in the Sokoto Caliphate as the Ningi warriors raided the plains on the eastern frontier of Rausaland. Finally, the Ningi nomenclature also denotes not only when this society began but also the beginning of territorial identification and emerging pre-colonial citizenship. This “non-tribal” perspective also found expression in the Sokoto Caliphate, where group feelings (*asabiyya*) also yielded to citizenship (*dan kasa* or *dan gari, wataniyya*) in a heterogeneous empire. Oral tradition and Arabic documentation collected by the author support the linguistic methodology and other premises upon which this essay is based.


\(^{31}\) Patton, Thesis.