



NIGERIA

Area: 356,669 square miles

Population: 213,606,356

Capital: Abuja **Ethnic Groups:** More than 250 ethnic groups; the largest groups are: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Ijaw, Fulani, and Kanuri;

Languages: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani and more than 200 other indigenous languages; English (official)

Religions: Islam, approx. 50%; Christianity, approx. 40%; traditional, approx. 10%

Life Expectancy: 54.69 years (2019)

Literacy: 62%

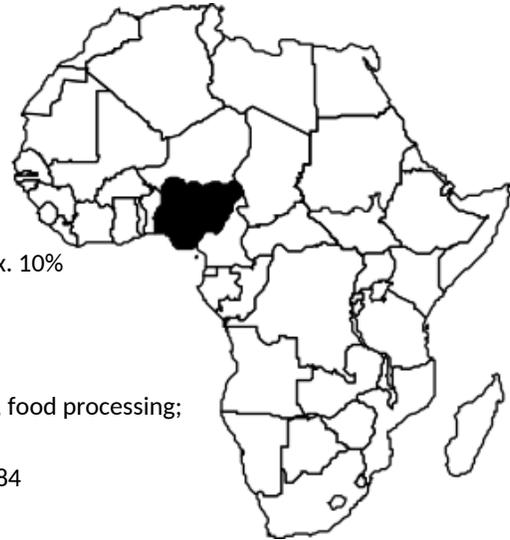
Economy: Agriculture: cocoa, peanuts, sorghum, yams, cassava, rice;

Industry: petroleum and petroleum products, rubber, wood, steel, textiles, food processing;

Exports: petroleum, cocoa, rubber, timber.

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 26.8 (2018 World Bank est.); rank 172 of 184

Gender Inequality Index: 0.63 est. (based on incomplete data)



Scratching Below the Surface of Nollywood

First there was Hollywood (the seat of the North American film industry) and then Bollywood (the film industry centered in South Asia). Nollywood's moment of global recognition arrived in the early 2000s, when the New York Times informally coined the term to describe the already booming cinema of Nigeria, the most populous nation on the African continent. Never mind their stereotype that placed the West as the "norm," or the fact that Nigerian cinema could claim earlier generations of African audiences and arguably contained many more stylistic iterations. The ancient arts and technological innovations found in the territory of today's Nigeria were equally unparalleled. Like the borrowed and foreign-imposed term "Nollywood," the region's early encounters with Europeans were replete with assumptions that such exquisite and technically perfect local arts must have been produced elsewhere. Archaeology and oral history confirm otherwise.

At the ancient site of Nok, terracotta sculptures date to around 500 BCE, two thousand years before Europeans set foot in the region, where early farmers and iron smelters labored. In the southern forest site of Igbo Ukwu, elaborate bronzes appear as part of an 8th century CE ritual burial and indirectly attest to the extent of horses and other trans-Saharan commodities. The Hausa Bakwai included Kano in a constellation of seven states, whose commercial reach was spread (legend says in 999 CE) by Hausa merchants, whose language still serves as the lingua franca of trading across West Africa. By 1000 CE, Islam appeared in Bornu and its influence spread to Kano and Katsina. At about the same time, a significant city state had emerged at Ile-Ife, in the coastal rain forest to the south, where both abstract and highly naturalistic terracotta, copper, and copper-alloy sculptures confirm an ancient kingship at the sacred place where the gods were believed to have created the Earth and its peoples.

By the time 15th-century Portuguese merchants arrived in Atlantic coastal waters, the capital of Benin had commissioned the building of some 16,000 km of earthen walls to define and defend its economic and political interior. These walls appear to be among the largest earthen structures in world history. The royal palace and elaborate court system relied on the support of genealogical history told through the distribution of carved ivory tusks, cast brass and bronze objects that relayed the official narrative, and a rich cycle of ceremonial life. Merchants representing the Benin obas (rulers) traded with European coastal merchants for centuries before their invasion by the Royal Niger Company at the close of the 19th century.

The Colonial Era

Despite the long prelude of commercial interactions and the unwillingness of some states to engage in the slave trade, British colonial conquest began in the 1860s. Disputes over European claims and trade in the Congo and Niger Rivers led thirteen European nations and the United States to convene the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), which settled the questions of Africa policy and the free, internationalized traffic along the rivers and pushed the "Scramble" for occupation of the continent. There were no African signatories nor African attendees. Missions were dispatched in the Niger basin during and after the conference to negotiate with local sovereigns in treaties of "protection." In the Benin Expedition of

1897, Royal Niger Company militia looted the royal palace, and shipped priceless art objects to England, where they were sold to pay for the costs of the expedition and found their way into private collections and world museums. The territory became a formal British colony after World War I.

Among the many powerful anti-colonial resistance efforts was the Ogu Umunwanyi, or Women's War (1929). The event was called the Aba Riots by the British, who sought to erase the women from the narrative and dismiss the seriousness of the women's actions. The protests were fueled by taxation and tensions that had disrupted women's political influence and threatened their economic independence. The women's actions were based on a traditional form of peaceful female protest known as "sitting on a man," in which naked women would surround an errant husband or other men in solidarity against a serious grievance. It has been estimated that tens of thousands of women of Igbo, Ibibio, and Opobo ethnic backgrounds had participated, with hundreds killed or injured, causing many recent historians to view the Women's War as the beginnings of pan-Nigerian nationalism.

A Modern Nigeria

Following independence in 1960, a series of military governments rose to power after the 1964-1965 elections were deemed contentious and plagued by violence. The Ironsi Coup of 1966 preceded and helped foment attacks on the Igbo populations in the North. After a counter coup led by Yakubu Gowon, the attempted succession of Biafra gave way to civil war (1967-1970). Personal greed, foreign interventions in the Niger Delta oil industry, and local corruption have threatened the fragile nation state, yet successful elections have been held since 1999. Today, the group known as Boko Haram (literally, "the book – i.e., Western education -- is forbidden") is a jihadist group targeting western cultural influences and calling for replacement of the Nigerian government with Islamic law. Their terrorist tactics have included the kidnapping of 274 schoolgirls in Borno State in 2014.

Despite the ethnic conflicts inherited from the colonial era and the religious tensions between the predominantly Muslim North and Christian South, Nigeria has survived to become a leader for the continent's peacekeeping and cooperative efforts. These have included founding the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In the 21st century, Nigeria has succeeded in building the largest economy on the African continent. The Smithsonian has removed their own Benin treasures from display, while the Metropolitan Museum of Art and German public museums have agreed to the return of hundreds of plundered objects. The return of cultural heritage will help ensure that the Nigerian artistic and philosophical achievements that became such prominent symbols of survival of African people and religions from the era of the Atlantic slave trade will also have an impact on millions in the modern nation.

--Candice Goucher, December 2021

Further Reading

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