

THE ETHNIC HISTORY OF NIGERIA

The name Nigeria was suggested by British journalist Flora Shaw in the 1890s. She referred to the area as Nigeria, after the Niger River, which dominates much of the country's landscape. The word *niger* is Latin for black.

More than 250 ethnic tribes call present-day Nigeria home. The three largest and most dominant ethnic groups are the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo (pronounced ee-bo). Other smaller groups include the Fulani, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, Tiv, and Edo. Prior to their conquest by Europeans, these ethnic groups had separate and independent histories. Their grouping together into a single entity known as Nigeria was a construct of their British colonizers. These various ethnic groups never considered themselves part of the same culture. This general lack of Nigerian nationalism coupled with an ever-changing and often ethnically biased national leadership, have led to severe internal ethnic conflicts and a civil war. Today bloody confrontations between or among members of different ethnic groups continue.

There is little feeling of national unity among Nigeria's people, there is little in terms of national symbolism. What exists was usually created or unveiled by the government as representative of the nation. The main national symbol is the country's flag. The flag is divided vertically into three equal parts; the center section is white, flanked by two green sections. The green of the flag represents agriculture, while the white stands for unity and peace. Other national symbols include the national coat of arms, the national anthem, the National Pledge (similar to the Pledge of Allegiance in the United States), and Nigeria's national motto: Peace and Unity, Strength and Progress.

Every ethnic group in Nigeria has its own stories of where its ancestors came from. These vary from tales of people descending from the sky to stories of migration from far-off places. Archaeologists have found evidence of Neolithic humans who inhabited what is now Nigeria as far back as 12,000 B.C.E.

The histories of the people in northern and southern Nigeria prior to colonization followed vastly different paths. The first recorded empire in present-day Nigeria was centered in the north at Kanem-Borno, near Lake Chad. This empire came to power

during the eighth century C.E. By the thirteenth century, many Hausa states began to emerge in the region as well.

Trans-Saharan trade with North Africans and Arabs began to transform these northern societies greatly. Increased contact with the Islamic world led to the conversion of the Kanem-Borno Empire to Islam in the eleventh century. This led to a ripple effect of conversions throughout the north. Islam brought with it changes in law, education, and politics.

The trans-Saharan trade also brought with it revolutions in wealth and class structure. As the centuries went on, strict Islamists, many of whom were poor Fulani, began to tire of increasing corruption, excessive taxation, and unfair treatment of the poor. In 1804 the Fulani launched a jihad, or Muslim holy war, against the Hausa states in an attempt to cleanse them of these non-Muslim behaviors and to reintroduce proper Islamic ways. By 1807 the last Hausa state had fallen. The Fulani victors founded the Sokoto Caliphate, which grew to become the largest state in West Africa until its conquest by the British in 1903.

In the south, the Oyo Empire grew to become the most powerful Yoruban society during the sixteenth century. Along the coast, the Edo people established the Benin Empire (not to be confused with the present-day country of Benin to the west), which reached its height of power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

As in the north, outsiders heavily influenced the societies of southern Nigeria. Contact with Europeans began with the arrival of Portuguese ships in 1486. The British, French, and Dutch soon followed. Soon after their arrival, the trade in slaves replaced the original trade in goods. Many of the coastal communities began selling their neighbors, whom they had captured in wars and raids, to the Europeans in exchange for things such as guns, metal, jewelry, and liquor.

After more than 350 years of slave trading, the British decided that the slave trade was immoral and, in 1807, ordered it stopped. They began to force their newfound morality on the Nigerians. Many local leaders, however, continued to sell captives to illegal slave traders. This led to confrontations with the British Navy, which took on the responsibility of enforcing the slave embargo. In 1851 the British attacked Lagos to try to stem the flow of slaves from the area. By 1861 the British government had annexed the city and established its first official colony in Nigeria.

As the nonslave trade began to flourish, so, too, did the Nigerian economy. A new economy based on raw materials, agricultural products, and locally manufactured goods saw the growth of a new class of Nigerian merchants.

In 1884, as European countries engaged in a race to consolidate their African territories, the British Army and local merchant militias set out to conquer the Africans who refused to recognize British rule. In 1914, after squelching the last of the indigenous opposition, Britain officially established the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria.

The nationalistic movement grew out of some of the modernization the British had instituted in Nigeria. The educated elite became some of the most outspoken proponents of an independent Nigeria. This elite had grown weary of the harsh racism it faced in business and administrative jobs within the government. Both the elite and the uneducated also began to grow fearful of the increasing loss of traditional culture. They began movements to promote Nigerian foods, names, dress, languages, and religions.

As calls for self-determination and a transfer of power into the hands of Nigerians grew, Britain began to divest more power into the regional governments. As a result of early colonial policies of divide and conquer, the regional governments tended to be drawn along ethnic lines. With this move to greater regional autonomy, the idea of a unified Nigeria became to crumble. Regionally and ethnically based political parties sprang up as ethnic groups began to wrangle for political influence.

Nigeria gained full independence from Britain on 1 October 1960. Immediately following independence, vicious fighting between and among political parties created chaos within the fledgling democracy. On 15 January 1966 a group of army officers, most of whom were Igbo, staged a military coup, killing many of the government ministers from the western and northern tribes. Six months later, northern forces within the military staged a counter coup, killing most of the Igbo leaders. Anti-Igbo demonstrations broke out across the country, especially in the north. Hundreds of Igbos were killed, while the rest fled to the southeast.

On 26 May 1967 the Igbo-dominated southeast declared it had broken away from Nigeria to form the independent Republic of Biafra. This touched off a bloody civil war that lasted for three years. In 1970, on the brink of widespread famine resulting from a Nigeria-imposed blockade, Biafra was forced to surrender. Between five hundred thousand and two million Biafran civilians were killed during the civil war, most dying from starvation, not combat.

Following the war, the military rulers encouraged a national reconciliation, urging Nigerians to once again become a unified people. While this national reconciliation succeeded in reintegrating the Biafrans

into Nigeria, it did not end the problems of ethnicity in the country. In the years that followed, Nigeria was continually threatened by disintegration due to ethnic fighting. These ethnic conflicts reached their height in the 1990s.

After decades of military rule, elections for a new civilian president were finally held on 12 June 1993. A wealthy Yoruba Muslim named Moshood Abiola won the elections, beating the leading Hausa candidate. Abiola won support not only from his own people but from many non-Yorubas as well, including many Hausas. This marked the first time since Nigeria's independence that Nigerians broke from ethnically based voting practices. Two weeks later, however, the military regime had the election results annulled and Abiola imprisoned. Many commanders in the Hausa-dominated military feared losing control to a southerner. They played on the nation's old ethnic distrusts, hoping that a divided nation would be easier to control. This soon created a new ethnic crisis. The next five years saw violent protests and mass migrations as ethnic groups again retreated to their traditional homelands.

The sudden death of Nigeria's last military dictator, General Sani Abacha, on 8 June 1998 opened the door for a transition back to civilian rule. Despite age-old ethnic rivalries, many Nigerians again crossed ethnic lines when they entered the voting booth. On 22 February 1999 Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba who ironically lacked support from his own people, won the presidential election. Obasanjo is seen as a nationalist who opposed ethnic divisions. However, some northern leaders believe he favors his own ethnic group.

Unfortunately, violent ethnic fighting in Nigeria continues. In October 2000, clashes between Hausas and supporters of the Odua People's Congress (OPC), a militant Yoruba group, led to the deaths of nearly a hundred people in Lagos. Many also blame the OPC for sparking riots in 1999, which killed more than a hundred others, most of them Hausas.