

**Nigeria:
Change and Tradition
in an African State**

Third Edition

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INTRODUCTION

Africans, like other peoples of the world, inhabit a present which emerged from a unique past and is moving toward an uncertain future. For Africans, as for all other peoples, this cultural dynamic has existed from the beginning. Tradition in Africa, like tradition everywhere, has always renewed itself in response to change. Yet when Western scholars have spoken of African societies as traditional, they have all too often implied thereby that such societies are static, either not subject to change or unresponsive to its imperatives. When Europeans first began to acquaint themselves with African peoples, they assumed that they had "discovered" people who had been frozen in time. The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe despairs of this Western view of his land and people. In his critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe asserts that Conrad perpetuates a view of Africans as unchanging and unchanged ("An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" in Achebe's *Hope and Impediments: Selected Essays*, New York, Doubleday, 1989). Such a perspective fails to take account of the dynamic nature of African tradition. In Africa, tradition has never been static. Instead, it has responded to changing conditions of many kinds, in a continuing struggle to sustain both the glory of the past and the vitality of the present.

Africa is a huge continent of over 500 million inhabitants, divided today into over fifty different political units. The people can further be divided into as many as 3,000 cultural and linguistic groups. Despite such diversity, definitions of Africans by non-Africans frequently invoke the physical characteristics of race as the single unifying factor of a continent of peoples. According to Ali Mazrui, Kenyan scholar and narrator of the acclaimed public television series, *The Africans*, racial homogeneity among Africans has been overemphasized by Western observers, while commonalities of situation and experience have been ignored. To understand these

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shared circumstances, physical and cultural, indigenous and externally imposed, is to begin a journey toward a more complete and more accurate view of what being African means and has meant to Africans.

Shared circumstances are given by ecology and by history. The lands of Africa tend to be harsh and difficult—receiving either too much rain (in the rain forests), or too little (in the deserts and savannas). Soils are often infertile; insects and parasites prey upon crops and herds, making food production difficult. All but two enclaves on the continent were suddenly annexed by European powers at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, meaning that nearly all Africans have had to deal, as a part of their recent past, with the political and social problems of being colonized. Most African nations have achieved independence only recently, and then not on the basis of traditional ethnic distinctions but on the basis instead of political boundaries fixed by the colonizing countries.

Nigeria, the focus of our study of African tradition and change, is one of the new nations of Africa—the most populous and potentially one of the most powerful. Like the rest of Africa, it is ethnically and culturally diverse (some estimates place the number of languages spoken in Nigeria at about 250). Within its borders is represented what Mazrui refers to as the “Triple Heritage” of Africa: the African, the Islamic, and the Christian. Each of these three traditions comprises not only a distinct religious ethos but also an entire cultural milieu—linguistic, political, and material. Islam and Christianity represent the outside forces that have shaped modern African cultures, in combination with traditional religions and indigenous world views. The northern half of Nigeria is largely Islamic, while in the southern half Christian and traditional beliefs dominate. Estimates suggest that about 49% of Nigeria’s population is Muslim; about 34.5% are Christian; and about 18% follow traditional African religions.

Even the geographical configuration we now know as Nigeria reflects this triple heritage. There was no “nation” of Nigeria before 1912, when the country was created by the combination of two British colonized territories without regard to existing ethnic, political, or cultural identifications. The very name of the country was supplied by an outsider, Englishwoman Flora Shaw, who later

married Frederick Lugard, the most famous colonial administrator of Nigeria. In these and other ways, Nigeria encapsulates the tensions and the problems characteristic of the continent as a whole.

This text focuses on three important ethnic groups of Nigeria—the Hausa of the North, the Yoruba of the Southwest, and the Igbo of the Southeast. Our study of these groups, the three largest in the country, will underscore the diversity, richness, and complexity of Africa and, at the same time, examine how these cultures have dealt with the changes wrought by colonialism and early modern nationalism.

As we begin, some terms and usages should be clarified. First, the term *tribe* or *tribal* does not appear often in this text because the term is of uncertain meaning and often carries negative connotations. Where classification is necessary, ethnic or linguistic markers are preferred, though even these are modern contrivances which do not always correspond well to patterns of self-identification in traditional Africa. The word *Yoruba*, for example, is of Hausa origin, and was used by the Hausa to refer to the great empire of Oyo. The people who founded Oyo, and whom we now call Yoruba, often referred to themselves as *Oluku mi*, meaning *my friend*. The Hausa themselves have been referred to by many different names in history; the Fulani, who became closely associated with the Hausa in Nigeria, call them the *Habe*. The word *Hausa*, from the Kanuri language of northeastern Nigeria, means west, indicating that the Hausa lived west of the Kanuri. The word *Igbo*, from the Kwa languages of West Africa, has been variously translated as *forest-dweller* or *community* and may once have referred to a much larger group of people speaking related languages.

What, then, does ethnic identification mean? Usually, ethnicity refers to a complex of cultural practices, including language, kinship organization, economic activities, location, types of dwellings, and religious practices. Once we have become better acquainted with the geography and great kingdom history of West Africa, we shall return to our study of ethnicity by taking a closer look at community life among the Hausa, the Yoruba, and the Igbo.

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

Africa is the second largest continent, after Asia. It is three times larger than Europe and four times larger than the area of the United States. The coast of Africa has comparatively few gulfs or bays, however, with the result that the coastline itself appears shorter in total length than that of any other continent. Theories of tectonic plate movement suggest that the present African continent was at one time the center of a giant continent, from which the other continents have gradually drifted away. The African plate became isolated from the others, so that it has not been shaped by collisions with or passage of other plates, except in the northeastern corner where the Eurasian plate has had some effect, creating mountain ranges in the Ethiopia region.

Physical Features

The interior of the continent is marked by several shallow basins that can be picked out on a contour map (see Map A, at end of text). These basins are marked by drainage systems that have become associated with great river systems. Geographers over the years have remarked that a peculiarity of these rivers is that they all seem to take very indirect routes to their oceans. The Niger River of West Africa, from which Nigeria takes its name, flows first toward the Sahara Desert before taking a sudden turn to the south and thence out to the Atlantic through modern day Nigeria. Similarly, the Congo River flows north until it takes a sweeping turn to flow back south and west toward the Atlantic. The Zambezi River of Southern Africa appears headed for the Kalahari Desert before taking an abrupt turn toward the Indian Ocean. Lake Chad, on the northern border of Nigeria, represents the drainage of a basin that never developed an outlet to an ocean (similar to the formation of Great Salt Lake in Utah).

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As a result of these basins surrounded by ridges (escarpments), most of the rivers are broken by waterfalls and the rapids of cataracts where the rivers have cut their way through the ridges near the edges of the continent. Upriver travel into the African interior has been difficult historically because of these cataracts and falls. Still within the interior of the continent, rivers have often provided for ready movement of peoples. The Niger River, for example, in the region studied in this text, was a highway for trade and communication for several large African empires. A look at a physical map reveals that the southern third of the continent is nearly surrounded by the "Great Escarpment," where the edge of the ridges reaches almost to the sea. Features such as this and the escarpments of the Great Rift Valley in East Africa have constituted barriers to human movement and communication over the years.

[See Map A]

Climatic variations have also played a role in determining human movement and habitation on the African continent. From north to south, successive zones are increasingly arid and desert-like, next increasingly wet and tropical (in the Congo River Basin), and once again increasingly dry to desert-like, as in the Namib and Kalahari Deserts of Southern Africa. Between the arid and tropical zones lies the savanna that is characteristic of much of sub-Saharan Africa. A savanna is open country with scattered trees and vegetation, similar to the dryer parts of the Great Plains in the United States. Note that the dry grass savanna and the woodland savanna areas dominate most of Map B. The wettest or most tropical areas are found both at the coasts of East and West Africa and in the area of eastern Congo, the huge area drained by the Congo or Zaire River System.

The northern third of the continent is dominated by the Sahara Desert, part of an immense desert that stretches across the continents from Morocco to southern Pakistan and on to the Gobi Desert of Mongolia. The Namib Desert of Southern Africa reflects the mirror image of the global climatic feature that brought about the Sahara of the North. The Sahara provides a natural barrier to human movement, similar to the seas that surround the Southern half of the African continent. In fact, the southern edge of the Sahara is called the Sahel, an Arabic word which suggests a coast. Still, the Sahara has not been an impenetrable barrier. There were well-established caravan routes across the desert even by the time of the Roman Empire.

The Sahara is a fairly recent geological feature; we believe that what is now the desert was fairly well-watered and generally habitable as recently as around 5,000 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era). Since then, a process of desiccation has resulted in the desert's steady expansion to the north and south. The disastrous droughts in the Sahel in the 1970s, probably exacerbated by environmental mismanagement, forcefully brought this process to the attention of governments and people around the world.

[See Map B]

The escarpments, deserts, and rainforests are all features that have contributed to isolation of human groups within Africa and have served to make contact with people from outside Africa somewhat difficult.

Within the boundaries of Nigeria, most of these geographical features of the continent as a whole are reproduced on a smaller scale. The north is mostly arid country, dry savanna. The Niger River cuts across the country from west to east, taking a sharp turn south when it joins with the Benue River, which flows from east to west from the eastern border of Nigeria. The country is thus divided into two halves: the northern plateaus, semi-arid savanna country, and, below the confluence of the two great rivers, a southern half that is further divided into two parts by the Niger River as it flows to its delta in Southern Nigeria. North of the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers is the highest plateau in Nigeria—the Jos Plateau, which was an important site for early iron-working.

To the south, increasing rainfall and vegetation culminate in mostly tropical conditions and dense forests at the coast. The delta of the Niger is the dominant feature of the coast, as the creeks, inlets and mangrove swamps of the delta region stretch from the border with Cameroon nearly to Lagos. Tropical conditions are more pronounced on the eastern side of the Niger, the region roughly associated with the Igbo people. Savanna conditions reach further to the south toward the coast on the western side, the area where the Yoruba people are dominant.

[See Map C]

A further condition that has shaped human life in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, has been the composition of soils for agriculture. The most prevalent soil on the continent is the mineral

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type associated with deserts, characterized by minimum fertility (about 28% of the continent is covered by such poor soils). An additional fifth of the soil of Africa is weakly developed or nearly infertile due to lack of moisture or erosion by wind. Almost as much of the soil is high in mineral, particularly iron, content (hence the typical red color of African soils), which is subject to loss of fertility due to leaching by water in areas of high rainfall, such as in the rainforest. Human use of some land has led to further deterioration; for example, in large parts of southern Nigeria, patches of so-called secondary forest are all that remain of what formerly were extensive rainforests.

These conditions of climate, vegetation cover, and soil types are factors contributing to the difficulties of African farmers and food producers in West Africa.

Food and Agriculture

The geographical features of West Africa resulted in a major division along the lines of food crops, a division represented in Nigeria, as well. In the open savannah of the north, grain or cereal crops could be grown. To the south, in the forest belt, people relied more on root crops, such as yams.

Grains or cereals are actually "ennobled grasses," so it is hardly surprising that as people began to cultivate plants, those living in savannah country would develop the cultivation of grasses. The important cereals have been millet and sorghum. Wild sorghum is indigenous to the African continent, as may be wild millet, although this is less certain. The Ethiopian region of northeast Africa appears to have been an important early area for cultivation of both crops, although a West African cradle for these crops has not been ruled out. There are many different varieties of these grains (for example, in Africa millets include crops known as finger millet and pearl millet). Wild rice, or dry rice (eleusine), was probably developed as a food crop in Ethiopia, as well, but did not become as widespread in West Africa as the sorghums and millets. Cereal crops have been associated with the development of large-scale states in the western Savannah, perhaps because of the scale of organization required for such cultivation and the food surplus thus made possible.

Stretching through the forest belt of West Africa, from the Ivory Coast to the highlands of Cameroon east of Nigeria, runs the area of

the Yam Complex. This Yam Complex is nearly coextensive with the distribution of peoples who speak the closely related languages of the Kwa language family (Yoruba and Igbo are both Kwa languages). Interestingly, the yam is not the central food product beyond the area of the Kwa speakers, even though it could have been. Historians assume that yam cultivation began with digging for wild yams and tubers, leading to the practice of gradual cultivation between 2500 and 1500 B.C.E. Other types of yams have been brought to Africa for cultivation, but Igbo traditions make it clear that the indigenous guinea yam is much more prestigious than imported types. In their New Yam Festival, only the traditional yams are used, and these are the only ones that count when designating farmers for honors or titles. These indigenous yams have been fully domesticated; wild yams may still be found in Nigeria and gathered by the very poor for food, but these yams are often toxic and must be pounded and boiled to be made edible.

Other food crops that appear to have been indigenous to Nigeria include cowpeas, a few species of groundnuts (known as peanuts in the U.S.), the oil palm, egusi, (a type of melon), fluted pumpkin, okro (or okra, an example of an Igbo word that has come into English), African breadfruit, Malagueta pepper, and kola nuts, which later became important in long-distance trade in West Africa.

Many important food crops have been borrowed from other continents. These borrowed crops have in many cases become extremely important in the diets and cultures of Africans. The eminent African historian, Jan Vansina, claims, "Cultivation of the banana revolutionized life in the forest."¹ The banana and plantain, water yams, and cocoyams or taro root, all originated in Asia. Botanists agree that the banana reached Africa at least two thousand years ago.

Major crops came also from the Americas, specifically maize (what Americans refer to as corn), cocoa as a major cash crop in modern times, and cassava, also known as manioc. Cassava is quite important in Nigeria today, because the flour of cassava, known as garri, is cheap, filling, and tasty.

Most food animals were borrowed from outside Africa, it appears. Cattle are signs of wealth and well-being throughout Africa. The first variety of cattle in West Africa appear from archaeological records to have been a short-horned, diminutive variety called

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"muturu" These smaller cattle were later replaced by the larger variety known as "Zebu" cattle, which are humped with long, curving horns. These cattle originated in India. In historical times, Zebu cattle were associated especially with the Fulani people who live throughout the savannah country of West Africa. Herds are not usually found in the forest belt because of lack of grazing land and cattle sickness caused by the tse-tse fly. While the cattle herders such as the Fulani provided butter, milk, and also manure for fertilizer, they also caused some tension because of trampled fields. Even today, cattle are raised primarily for the butter and other dairy goods they produce. In general, Africans do not eat the cattle, except for special occasions or out of necessity. Most of the diets of pastoralists are provided by non-animal, vegetable sources.

PRINCIPAL CROPS OF MODERN DAY NIGERIA IN ORDER OF PRODUCTION, BY METRIC TON, 1989*

Crop	Tons
Cassava	15,425
Yams	9,609
Sorghum	4,831
Millet	4,770
Rice (paddy)	3,303
Maize (corn)	2,132
Plantains (like bananas)	1,700
Pulses	1,456
Other fruits	1,402
Taro (cocoyam)	1,299
Sugar cane	1,180
Groundnuts (peanuts)	1,017
Palm oi	857
Palm kernels	373
Cocoa beans	160

*Latest year with complete data. *Africa South of the Sahara*, 1994, 3rd ed. London: Europa Publications, Ltd., p. 670.

In modern times, many crops have been grown for sale and export rather than for consumption by local peoples. For example, in northern Nigeria today, one sees large fields of cotton and groundnuts for export markets. In the nineteenth century, palm oil became a major export crop from southern Nigeria. Used at first as a lubricant, palm oil is now used primarily for soap and food products. In the western regions of the Nigerian forest belt, cocoa has been developed as an important "cash crop" (for export, rather than for subsistence consumption by the farmers themselves). The table on page 6 clearly shows the continued importance of food crops, especially cassava, but also corn, rice, and yams, to feed Nigeria's huge population. Major cash crops also appear on this list.

Summary

The physical features of the African continent, such as difficulties of upriver travel, lack of harbors, the barriers of desert, rainforest, and escarpments, have tended to create conditions of isolation from influences outside the continent. On the other hand, the open savannas, as in West Africa, and some of the great rivers, such as the Niger, have allowed for ease of internal travel and migration. The deserts were not impenetrable, moreover, and trade-routes crisscrossed even the great Sahara.

Nigeria exhibits many of the physical features of the rest of the continent, with arid lands and savanna in the North, the great Rivers Niger and Benue in the middle, and the rainforest regions to the South. Many food crops now important in Nigeria were imported from outside Africa, including maize, bananas, and cassava. In the colonial and modern times, there was a drift toward cultivating so-called "cash crops" for export, away from the subsistence agriculture which predominated in earlier times.

Note

- ¹ Jan Vansina, "Western Bantu Expansion," *Journal of African History*, 25 (1984), p.141.