

Chapter 22 – Nigeria: A Country of Many Cultures – SSWG 2a & 3c

1. Introduction



Long ago, people from many parts of the African continent met to trade in the land now known as Nigeria. **Nomads** from the **desert** came to trade with the forest people, exchanging salt, cloth, and weapons for slaves, ivory, and kola nuts.

Over time, many different **ethnic groups** settled in this area. An ethnic group is a group of people who share a common culture. Each of these various ethnic groups retained its own identity and way of life.

Today the country of Nigeria has more than 250 ethnic groups living within its borders. Each of these groups has its own name and speaks its own distinct language. Together these groups have created great **ethnic diversity** within Nigeria. No other country in Africa is home to such a wide variety of people, each group having its own culture.

With such ethnic diversity, Nigeria can be a confusing place to study. To help examine such a diverse area, geographers often divide it into **regions**. In Chapter 2, you learned that a region is an area defined

by one or more characteristics that set it apart from other areas. One way to understand Nigeria is to divide it into **cultural regions**, each set apart by the way of life of the people who live there.

In this chapter, you will explore the three main cultural regions of the country of Nigeria. You will learn about the **physical features** of each region, meet the largest ethnic group living there, and learn about the region's culture and economy.

Essential Question

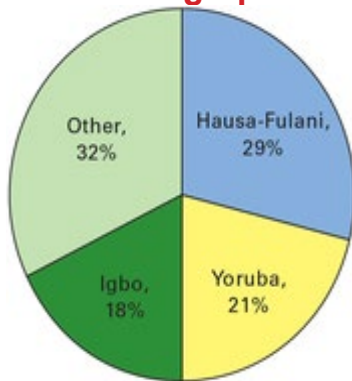
How can dividing a diverse country into regions make it easier to understand?

This map shows the African country of Nigeria. Notice that it is divided into three regions: northern, western, and eastern. Each region is home to one of Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups. Keep the map in mind as you try to answer the Essential Question.

Graphic Organizer



2. The Geographic Setting



To locate Nigeria on a map of Africa, follow the Atlantic coastline of the continent until you reach the Gulf of Guinea. The country of Nigeria lies beside this large inlet of the sea. Two rivers form a Y inside Nigeria, naturally dividing the country into three regions. The Benue River forms the right arm of the Y, flowing from east to west across the country. The Niger River forms the left arm and the stem of the Y, flowing from west to east to meet the Benue River. After the two rivers meet, the Niger turns south to the sea.

From Many Ethnic Groups to One Country For most of its history, the area around the Niger River has been home to many peoples. Its hundreds of ethnic groups are further divided into **linguistic groups**, or groups of people who share a distinct language.

▶ Geoterms

colonialism a system in which one country rules another area as a colony. The ruling country controls trade with its colony for its own benefit.

cultural region an area that is set apart from other places by the way of life of the people who live there

ethnic diversity a variety of people from different ethnic groups

linguistic group a group of people who share a common language

During the mid-1800s, **colonialism** came to West Africa. Colonialism is a system of government in which one country rules other places as colonies, with the ruling country controlling trade with its colonies for its own benefit. During this time, Great Britain took over areas of West Africa. In 1914, it joined parts of these areas to form the colony of Nigeria. As the ruling country, Britain gained control of Nigeria's **natural resources**, with the most valuable resources being oil, tin, and gold. At the same time, Nigeria became a new market for many goods that were produced by British factories.

Under British rule, some groups of people were more willing to cooperate with their colonial rulers. As a result, they were treated better than other groups, receiving more education and the best jobs. Other groups resented the favored groups—and they resented their British rulers as well.

Resentment finally brought about demands for self-rule, with protestors marching in the streets and refusing to work. As the protests grew, Britain found it harder to control Nigeria. On October 1, 1960, Nigeria became an independent country.

Ethnic and Religious Tensions Divide Nigeria

After independence, Nigerians adopted a federal system of government, but conflict between ethnic groups made governing the country very difficult. A more stable government was finally elected in 1999. Today Nigeria is divided into 36 states, each with its own local laws. An elected president heads Nigeria's national government.

Cultural differences still divide Nigeria's various ethnic groups. Language is just one way in which these groups differ. The national government has made English the country's official language, and English is taught in schools throughout Nigeria. However, each group still speaks its own language at home.

The people are also divided by their religious beliefs. Almost half of Nigerians follow the religion of Islam. Around two fifths are Christians. Many Nigerians also follow traditional beliefs. One of these beliefs is that all natural objects, such as trees and clouds, have spirits. Another belief is that the deceased live on as spirits to guide and help the living in their journey through life.



3. Life in Northern Nigeria

One of the first things a geographer notices about northern Nigeria is how dry the region is. In many places, women have to walk for miles each day in order to get water. During the six-month dry season, very little rain falls. Some rivers dry up completely, and lakes shrink so dramatically that a 5-mile walk for water in the wet season can become a 10-mile walk in the dry season.



Physical Environment: A Land of Little Water Much of northern Nigeria consists of high, flat plains. Grasses and thorn trees covered these plains before people cleared the land in order to start farming. Rising up out of the plains is the Jos Plateau. Many people live and farm on this high ground because the weather on the plateau is cooler and wetter than on the plains below.

Lake Chad is an important source of water for many people in the region, but over the last 40 years the lake has been shrinking. In the 1960s, Lake Chad covered as much as 4,000 square miles in its driest season, but by the year 2000, as a result of [drought](#) and the increased use of its water for irrigation, the lake was less than one tenth that size. Some geographers fear that Lake Chad could eventually dry up completely.

A powerful wind known as the *harmattan* also affects life throughout northern Nigeria. Blowing south from the Sahara between October and March, the harmattan brings large clouds of dust that coat everything with fine, gritty sand.



Ethnic Groups: The Hausa and Fulani

The two largest ethnic groups in northern Nigeria are the Hausa and the Fulani. The Hausa came to this region about 1,000 years ago, establishing villages that later grew into important trading centers and, eventually, kingdoms. During the 1200s, the Fulani also began to settle in northern Nigeria.

Over time, people from both ethnic groups married and created a connected culture. As a result, some people refer to the two groups as the Hausa-

Fulani. However, there are distinct differences between these two ethnic groups, including language. About a third of Nigerians speak the Hausa language, whereas traditional Fulani speak Fulfulde, a less common language.

The two ethnic groups also differ in where they live. The Hausa people tend to be more [urban](#). In contrast, most of the Fulani people still live in [rural](#) areas, traveling with their cattle herds during the dry season to search for grazing land. During the rainy season, the Fulani live in villages and plant crops. The Hausa and the Fulani are united by their faith because both groups are Muslim. However, many other ethnic groups in Nigeria are Christian, and tension between Muslims and Christians has increased in recent years. One reason for this is that some states have chosen to make [shari'a](#), or traditional Islamic laws, the basis of their legal system. These laws cover many aspects of daily life, like marriage and divorce. Non-Muslims often resent having to live under laws that do not agree with their religious beliefs.



Culture: Thatched Roofs and Kalangu

Drums Northern Nigeria's hot [climate](#) affects the kinds of homes people build. In the city, most houses have flat roofs, and people sometimes sleep outside on their roofs on hot nights. In the country, people build round homes out of mud and cover them with roofs woven from reeds or palm leaves, materials that provide good shelter from the sun. Northern Nigerians favor loose clothes that protect them from the sun. Men wear baggy cotton pants and floor-length robes, with the front of the robes often heavily embroidered. They also wear an Arab-style hat called a *fez*. Women also wear robes that cover the entire body. Some women wear a cloth headdress. Muslim women wear a *hijab*, or headscarf, that covers the hair and neck, and some also wear a veil that hides most of the face.

A popular traditional musical instrument is the tension drum, which is made from wood with an animal skin stretched tightly over the drum's top. The Hausa tension drum, called a *kalangu*, makes sounds like those heard in Hausa speech.

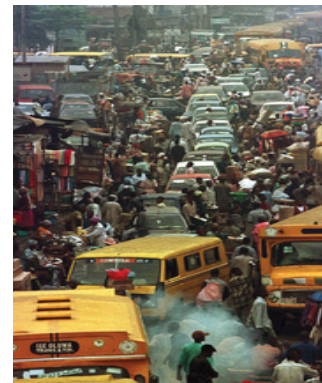
Economy: Farming, Herding, and Trading Many of the people in northern Nigeria make their living as farmers and herders. Hausa farmers grow crops such as corn and millet, which is a kind of grain. These farmers eat some of the crops that they produce and sell the rest in local village markets. Fulani herders make their living by selling milk or products that are made from milk, like butter, to villagers. The herders rarely kill cows to sell as meat.

The Hausa have traditionally made beautiful cloth and leather goods. People once traveled from all over Africa to buy Hausa crafts. Some Hausa also work as traders and merchants, selling traditional crafts and factory-made goods to local people and tourists.

4. Life in Western Nigeria

It is rush hour in Lagos, the largest city in Africa. The bustling streets are packed with cars, buses, trucks, and bicycles. The city has become famous for its "go-slows," or traffic jams. Young boys crowd around the stopped vehicles to sell a great variety of goods, everything from smoked fish to brushes. Girls also sell things, while balancing bags of water on their heads. They offer drinks, nuts, candy, and even watches and makeup to the frustrated drivers.

The Physical Environment: Rainforest to Savanna Western Nigeria sits on the Gulf of Guinea beside a wide bay called the Bight of Benin. The Niger River forms the northern and eastern borders of this part of Nigeria.



Before people settled in western Nigeria, a [tropical rainforest](#) developed along the coastline. Over time, most of this rainforest was cleared for farming or was cut down to sell as timber. Much of western Nigeria is a [savanna](#), a broad, flat land covered with tall grasses and scattered trees.

Twenty years ago, almost everyone in western Nigeria lived in villages, but since then many people have moved to cities to seek work. By 2008, about half of all Nigerians lived in cities. About a fifth of these city dwellers lived in western Nigeria's two largest cities, Lagos and Ibadan.

Ethnic Groups: The Yoruba The Yoruba make up the largest ethnic group in western Nigeria. Many Yoruba are Christian, although some follow Islam or traditional beliefs.

The Yoruba people first came to Nigeria around 100 B.C.E. They lived in villages that later grew into kingdoms. Each one of the Yoruba kingdoms had its own king and its own [dialect](#). A dialect is a version of a language that is spoken in a specific area. A person from one Yoruba kingdom might not easily understand the dialect spoken in another kingdom. However, in recent years the various Yoruba dialects have become more similar. Today about one fifth of the people in Nigeria speak forms of Yoruba.

Culture: Tin Roofs, Beadwork, and Royal Statues

Many of the Yoruba people have relocated from the countryside to one of western Nigeria's cities. Those who are well-off live in one-story houses or in apartments. The poor, on the other hand, live in shacks that are clustered on the outskirts of the cities. The shacks are often put together with such materials as scrap wood, metal, and cardboard. These [shantytowns](#) lack electricity, running water, and garbage service.

In the countryside, the Yoruba live in houses that are made of mud bricks and usually topped with a steeply sloped roof of tin or iron. During hot weather, the overhanging roof provides shelter from the sun. During the wet season, people put buckets under the edge of their roofs to collect rainwater.

The Yoruba are known for their colorful cloth and beadwork. The cloth is woven by Yoruba women and sold at markets in the cities. Yoruba kings wear beautiful robes covered with beads. In fact, every object made for a king is beaded, from his shoes to his crown. Yoruba crowns have beaded birds perched on them, looking as if they were suddenly going to fly away. Yoruba crowns have a beaded fringe to conceal the identity of the king.

Much of Yoruba art has been made to honor their long line of kings. Yoruba artists create fancy wood masks for their kings, and they make bronze or clay statues to represent kings who have died. Like the Hausa, the Yoruba are also known for their drums. One type of tension drum, called a *dundun*, is shaped like an hourglass, wide at the top and bottom and narrow in the middle. This tension drum imitates some of the sounds of the Yoruba's spoken language, which is why it is sometimes called a *talking drum*.

Economy: Farms, Factories, and Markets Those Yoruba who live in cities hold a variety of jobs. Some work in factories. Others work in offices. Still others are teachers, engineers, or doctors.

Some urban Yoruba commute back to the country to work on small family farms. This is the reverse of what many Nigerians do, which is to commute from the country to the city.

Yoruba women often make money by selling goods in street markets. They sell produce, such as yams and corn, from their farms, and they sell homemade cloth, baskets, and other traditional goods that tourists might want to purchase.



5. Life in Eastern Nigeria

For centuries, the Niger River had served as an important source of fish for the people of eastern Nigeria. Then oil was found in the Niger River's **delta**. Today **pollution** from oil spills has killed most of the fish in the delta. For all of the wealth that oil brings to the country, oil pollution has made life difficult for eastern Nigerians who used to depend on the river for water and food.

Physical Environment: Rivers and Rich Resources Eastern Nigeria sits on the Gulf of Guinea beside a second bay known as the Bight of Biafra. The Benue River forms the northern edge of the region, and the Niger River forms the western edge.

This region receives more rainfall than other parts of Nigeria. Long ago, there were rainforests here, but people have cut down most of the trees to sell as timber. Today swamps line the coast.

The Niger River has built up a large delta where it enters the Gulf of Guinea. The Niger Delta is one of the world's largest **wetlands** and also contains Nigeria's large oil deposits.



Ethnic Groups: The Igbo The Igbo (pronounced *ee-bo*) are the largest ethnic group in eastern Nigeria. This group of people first settled here thousands of years ago. Unlike the Yoruba, the Igbo did not develop kingdoms, but instead lived in villages, with each village ruled by a council of elders.

Each village spoke its own dialect of the Igbo language. There are more than 300 Igbo dialects, but some may soon disappear. Although about 18 percent of Nigerians are Igbo, the majority of Nigerians speak English as their primary language.

During colonial times, the Igbo worked with British missionaries and officials. Most became Christian, and many were educated at church schools. The British rewarded them with positions in business and government throughout the colony.

After Nigeria became independent, things did not go well for the Igbo people. Other ethnic groups in Nigeria resented the power that the Igbo had. Igbo who had migrated to other regions of the country were killed by the thousands. At least one million more Igbo fled in terror back to their home region, where they remained deeply suspicious of their neighbors to the north and west.

In 1967, the Igbo tried to break away from Nigeria. Their goal was to form a country of their own called Biafra. The Nigerian government sent troops to the region to stop the breakaway, and hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of the war that followed. In 1970, Nigeria was once more united as a country, but the memories of the war are still fresh in the minds of many Igbo.

Culture: Houses on Stilts, Colorful Wraps, and Masked Dancers In the cities, the Igbo build houses using mud bricks, with metal roofs protecting the houses from heavy rains. In swampy areas, people build their houses on stilts. During the rainy season, they paddle canoes to their homes and climb ladders to get inside.

Igbo wrap themselves in colorful cloths. Igbo women wear one cloth wrapped around the lower body and another around the head. The men wrap a cloth around the lower body. The traditional hat for men is a cap.

Across Africa, people create masks for rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Masked dancing is popular among the Igbo, who make masks of wood or leather and decorate them with teeth, hair, fur, and other materials. The Igbo design their masks in secret and keep them hidden until they wear them, thereby allowing the masks to remain mysterious and important.



Economy: Oil and Education Farming used to be Nigeria's main economic activity. Today it is oil. Most of Nigeria's wealth comes from selling oil to other countries.

Foreign oil companies are in charge of the country's oil industry. They operate much like the former colonial powers. They control certain areas of the country, take most of the oil profits, and have great political influence. In the past, these companies also brought in foreign workers instead of hiring local people.

Nigeria's government has worked to change some of these practices. Today, many Igbo work in the oil industry. But Nigeria does not benefit as much as it could.

The Igbo have also used education to improve their lives. During colonial times, many Igbo attended college. Today, their children and grandchildren serve Nigeria as doctors, lawyers, and teachers.

Summary - Beginning to Think Globally

In this chapter, you learned about Nigeria and its ethnic diversity. You explored the country's three main cultural regions: northern, western, and eastern Nigeria. In addition, you read about some of the problems that face a country with so many different ethnic and linguistic groups.

Ethnic conflict is a problem in many parts of the world. In Africa, ethnic tensions were made worse by colonialism. The colonial powers established most of Africa's present-day national boundaries, but they gave little thought to how well the groups within a country might get along. Think about this as you examine the map of African ethnic groups in the next section.

Global Connections



The small map shows how Africa was divided into colonies in 1914. The large map shows Africa today. The red lines indicate where people of various ethnic groups live, and the black lines represent country borders.

Why do most African countries have so many cultural regions? In Africa, it is rare for ethnic boundaries and political boundaries to match. Most African countries were created during colonial times. European countries divided Africa into colonies to suit their own needs, without giving much consideration to tensions that might arise between ethnic groups living in the same colony.

What problems do countries with many cultural regions face? Countries with many cultural regions have found it difficult to choose a national language because each group wants its own language to be chosen. To prevent conflict, many of the former colonies that were ruled by Britain or France have chosen English or French as their common language. Ethnic conflict has been another serious problem. Some ethnic groups have a long history of disagreements, and often old hatreds have erupted into war.



What are some ways governments might reduce cultural conflicts? One way of reducing cultural conflict is to promote a common identity for everyone. In Nigeria, this means persuading people to think of themselves as Nigerians first, and as part of an ethnic group second. Another way is to give local governments more power so that each group can shape the laws in its own area to suit its way of life.