



Geography

Take an outline map of Africa, and draw in the four great rivers – Nile, Niger, Congo and Zambezi;¹ these give a reference point and framework for a grasp of the history, peoples, movements, exploration and mission work of the whole Continent. The River Niger rises in the Fouta Djallon Highlands of Guinea, north of Sierra Leone, and passes through Guinea, Mali, Niger, Benin and Nigeria on its 2,600-mile course to the sea in the Gulf of Guinea (Biafra Bight on some older maps). Nigeria bestrides the latter part of the course of the river, with its delta of swamps, mangroves and lagoons. From Lagos in the west, through Port Harcourt to Calabar in the east, this coastline was a significant stretch of “The White Man’s Grave” of the 18th and 19th centuries. The high Jos Plateau is at the centre of Nigeria, with the land falling away northward toward Niger. Lower areas to the northeast border Lake Chad. South of the Plateau the land is divided by river valleys, the broadest formed by the Niger River and its main tributary, the Benue.

These flow from west and east respectively, and at Lokoja they meet then as the Niger, and run south across the broad coastal plains to the vast delta.

Bordering Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin, Nigeria is not the largest country in Africa, ranked only fourteenth in that table.² The area is equivalent to Europe north of the Pyrenees and west of the Rhine. In terms of population though, Nigeria heads the list, with almost twice the number of people (119 million) as the next on the list, Egypt. I have read that one fifth of the population of the whole African Continent is Nigerian. Abuja, the modern capital city, is less than 10 degrees north of the Equator, a similar latitude to Panama City.

Peoples & Languages

Over 250 distinct peoples count Nigeria as home,³ producing a rich, turbulent and varied culture. In the north, the Hausa and Fulani are predominant; the Yoruba, Edo and Ibo peoples make the largest groups in the south. It is essential for any

understanding of the tensions and conflicts in Nigeria to note that some of the same peoples, linked by language, tribe, culture and history, will be found also in Niger, Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Cameroon, probably Chad, possibly even Sudan.

The ties and support associations of these peoples are not defined, confined or controlled by the straight-line boundary arrangements of recent colonial powers or map makers. Members of the various groups have always been likely to blame those of another group for their problems, and to strive for dominance in one way or another. It is in an attempt to reduce the political impact of these older tribal loyalties that the modern Federal Republic of Nigeria is administered as thirty smaller states (it had been three, then twelve).

The official language is English, which is a great help in terms of Scripture distribution, but over 400 languages are in use, at least twenty in major groups. After English, Hausa and Yoruba are probably the most used tongues. Hausa seems more allied to the North African languages, Berber and Arabic, than to other West African tongues. The majority of Hausa speakers is Muslim, and has a literary heritage extending back centuries before any contact with European culture. For the Yoruba, though, with their own 1,000-year history, the language was only written down in the 19th century by Christian missionaries.





left:
Terracotta
head of the
Nok people

Bottom
right:
c. 15th
century
ivory
saltcellar⁴

Early History

Talking of the history of Nigeria before the 19th century we can only refer to events amongst the peoples who lived in the general area of the Niger-Benue confluence and Delta. There had been many ancient city-states in this region, including the Yoruba city of Ife, the Hausa Kanem-Bornu kingdom, and the powerful Benin kingdom in the southwest, famous for its bronze sculptures. The more ancient Nok culture of West Africa was centred here. They had discovered the way of smelting iron and were able to make weapons and durable tools, and vessels for cooking. They were artists and craftsmen, too, and since the uncovering of various sites by archaeologists in the last century there is today a trade in the terracotta heads of the Nok people. Looking at these glimpses of large, powerful, relatively sophisticated cultures, and then comparing them with the grievous, gruesome descriptions of conditions in Nigeria given by the explorers and missionaries of the 19th century, one can only sorrow at the numbing and benighting power of sin, and

the inevitable fall of all empires that are without God and without hope in the world. “History after the Flood shows that man rapidly reproduced great civilisations, and then declined from them.”⁵

European Arrival:

trade, exploration,
& colonialism.

In the 15th century the Portuguese worked their way along the West African coast, including the Niger Delta.⁶ The beginnings of Western exploitation of the existing internal slave trading amongst the tribal kingdoms soon followed. In the closing years of the 18th century Mungo Park began exploring the Nigerian interior, followed in the 1830s by Richard and John Lander. During the 19th century the largely Islamic Fulani people had launched a jihad (holy war), and dominated much of the country.

By 1861 Britain had taken control of Lagos and began expanding control of the region. The Royal Niger Company was chartered in 1886 and gained control of all trading companies on the Niger River and in the north. This broke an unwritten understanding that the Europeans would only deal at the coastal ports, leaving the local tradesmen to secure and deliver the needed goods from the interior. Fighting



and skirmishing to resist this shift from trade to apparent occupation became almost a way of life. To catch a feel of the shifting turmoil of that time, philatelists can attempt to unravel the tangle of postage stamps issued from Lagos, the Niger Territories, the Oil River Protectorate, Niger Coast Protectorate, Southern Nigeria, and Northern Nigeria, all in the years from 1874-1914.⁷

The Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria was established under the British Crown in 1914, and a more settled economic development began. In 1947 a new constitution involved more Nigerians in government, in 1960 independence was achieved, under Sir Adesoji Aderemi, the first Nigerian Governor and first ever African Governor in the Commonwealth. Abubaka Tafawa Balewa became Prime Minister from 1960-1966, and Nigeria became a republic in 1963.

European Arrival: missions and more.

One of the rewards of researching these articles lies in being reminded of old friends; biographies and accounts not read since student days are dug out, read anew, and new insights gained. It has been a joy these past weeks to say ‘Hello’ again to Mary Slessor, teaching in the Efik language in Calabar, Nigeria, from 1876-1916,⁸ and to the Yoruba slave Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who became an Anglican Bishop. A little further afield was Granville Sharp of Greek grammar fame



Mary Slessor (1848-1915)⁹

and his involvement, with the support and encouragement of Wilberforce and the ‘Clapham Sect’, in Sierra Leone where the freed slave Ajayi became a Christian, and gained an education and ordination, before returning to his Northern Nigeria homeland.

Nigeria did seem to engage the heart and spirit of many European congregations and to burden many believers with the need to carry the Gospel to this land. The two saints already mentioned are well remembered and regarded with honour and affection there to this day. They were in association with the United Presbyterian Church (Mary Slessor) and the Church Missionary Society (Samuel Crowther), but there were also Lutherans, Methodists, Southern Baptists and others at work. A range of specific Mission Societies became associated with work and workers in Nigeria. The Qua Iboe Mission (now Mission Africa) was begun in Nigeria in 1887, and worked also in Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Chad, with an emphasis on Church planting. Sudan United and Sudan Interior Missions have a long running involvement in Nigeria, too.¹⁰

In the 20th century this wide mix was followed by the very determinedly 'Indigenous African' churches so that today the church and denominational scene is richly varied! The nominalism which appears in second generation church life is a big problem, together with the seemingly inevitable syncretism as older traditions are reabsorbed, or even positively intruded into the thinking and practices of various churches. Unhappily, church alignments do also run along tribal and cultural lines, and a church associated with a politically strong tribe will gain many adherents for that reason only.

Islam

Islam in Nigeria dates back to the 11th century, first appearing in the northeast of the country and quickly becoming dominant in the Hausa lands. It was for a time the religion of the court and commerce there, spread by Muslim clerics and traders. Trade across the Sahara came to be increasingly handled by Muslims. A Muslim resurgence took place in western Africa in the 18th century. The Fulani cattle-driving people played a central role in this, and in northern Nigeria the Fulani scholar Uthman dan Fodio launched a jihad in 1804 that lasted for six years. This religious revolution had a political aspect, and it united the Hausa states under sharia law. In 1812 the Hausa dynasties

became part of the Islamic Caliphate of Sokoto. This Sokoto Caliphate ended in 1903 when the British incorporated it into the colony of Nigeria. The Sultan's power was transferred to the High Commissioner, but many aspects of the caliphate structure, including the Islamic legal system, continued into the colonial period.

There was a new impetus to the spread of Islam under Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of the Northern Region after Nigerian independence in 1960, and his Islamization programme led to the 'conversion' of over 100,000 people in the north. The military coup in 1966, which claimed the lives of many politicians including Ahmadu Bello, brought this Islamization programme to an abrupt end. However, government policy favouring the dominance of Islam continued. Islamization, historically, seems easier under military dictatorship, and Islam spread quickly under Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993).

Stamp depicting horsemen from the Islamic North East of Nigeria



Modern Nigeria: politics

In 1966 Ibo army officers seized the government in a coup, but this actually led to the massacre of thousands of Ibo in Northern Region. In a Hausa counter-coup, Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon was made president and worked for reconciliation, but in 1967 the Ibo-dominated Eastern Region seceded as the state Biafra. After a terrible war, in which thousands of Ibo died (many from starvation), Biafra collapsed in 1970. President Gowon did not make reprisals, but was deposed in 1975 in a bloodless coup. His successor was assassinated in 1976, and further military coups thwarted subsequent attempts to restore stable, civilian government.

President Ibrahim Babangida took over in 1985, promising a constitution that would restore civilian rule by 1992. It did not happen. In August 1993 he handed power to an Interim National Government but in November another bloodless coup led by the defence minister, General Sanni Abacha, led to the banning of all political activity. This was restored in 1995. After much unrest the election of retired General Olusegun Obasanjo as President in 1999 was a hopeful sign. Obasanjo had been a military ruler in 1976 and received international acclaim in 1979 as the first modern African military leader voluntarily to transfer power to civilians. His further re-election this year (2003) provided more encouragement. Being of the Yoruba people, Olusegun Obasanjo is of a Christian

background and testimony – not an easy position to maintain in modern West Africa.



The Nigerian Crest

Modern Nigeria: economics

As to the economic picture, agriculture, although declining, is still a majority occupation. Activities vary as to areas and ethnic groups. Generally the Hausa tend crops, the Fulani raise cattle. Cocoa and rubber are grown in the south, palm kernels in the east, and groundnuts (peanuts) are still an important cash crop. Local staples are cassava, yams and rice in the south, millet, sorghum and livestock in the north. Supply does not support the population, and much food is imported. Nigeria's



A street market in Ibadan, Nigeria

precarious economic mainstay is minerals, especially petroleum, which provides the greater part of its exports, and tin is mined on the Jos Plateau. All these exports have suffered severely from world price fluctuations. Health care and social welfare generally are inadequate, especially in rural areas. An education drive in the 1970s made primary schooling widely available, but secondary education is limited.

Not surprisingly with this political and economic background many Nigerians, about 70% of the population, live in financial distress. The national personal income is equivalent to US\$300 (£200): the national debt per person is nearer US\$400 (£270)! Summarising these problems, Patrick Johnstone in *Operation World* says, “The root problem of dishonest politics and corrupt government has not been squarely faced.”¹¹ Nigeria was once 50th in the table of well-off nations, now it is classified as among the thirty poorest nations. There are, of course, growing numbers of street children and orphans. Add to this picture the doom-laden presence of AIDS, and everything looks even darker. Between 4 and 6 million people, more than 6% of the population (15% of the military, 20% of

pregnant women), live with AIDS in Nigeria; nearly 2 million have died. Projections are that by the year 2020, 75 million Nigerians will be HIV positive or dying of AIDS. Observers tell us that they do not see the political will in Nigeria to address this problem, although President Obasanjo has, in contrast with all his predecessors, made some public references to the need.

Modern Nigeria: the religious scene

Just under half the population is Muslim, the rest being designated as Christian or following traditional African beliefs. Did you know that one of the most intense hot spots between Islam and Evangelical Christianity is in Nigeria? The city of Jos, because of its high plateau situation, has always attracted non-African workers, including Missions, as a place for administrative headquarters and healthy dwelling. But politically and traditionally it is on the very edge of the Islamic Hausa land, so Jos is targeted politically and religiously as a place where Islam must dominate. Pray for the troubled saints there, and for the vindication of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

This religious tension between Evangelical Christians and Islamic groups has long existed, and most governments since Independence have blatantly favoured Muslim needs and expectations. However, the extension of sharia law in a number of northern states has intensified the tension since December 1999. In one state, fourteen churches were burnt to the ground by suspected Islamic fundamentalists. The introduction of sharia law in January 2000 in Zamfara State led to widespread violence in which more than

1,000 people were killed; more states adopted Islamic law in 2001 and 2002. Nigerian central government openly recognises the incompatibility of sharia law with the federal constitution of the nation but President Olusegun Obasanjo has avoided intervening in decisions taken by states which apply Islamic law, calling only for moderation. He is regarded as an outspoken Christian, but knows that vigorous condemnation of sharia will only inflame passions further. But he also knows that the spread of sharia law will increase religious tension and undermine Nigerian unity. Pray that this administration under President Obasanjo may find the wisdom and the courage to address these issues.

In the midst of this the 530 [!] Protestant ‘denominations’ go about their work, including the sending of missionaries to other nations, as well as addressing the results of some of the contemporary issues, like the AIDS problem, street children, and orphans. Many church related matters needing change are identified and listed by different Christian Agencies, but surely one glaring necessity must rank high on any list. That is for indigenous Pastors and

Church signs on a busy Nigerian street



Teachers,¹² faithfully and patiently expounding the Scriptures, that not only may sinners hear the Gospel of redeeming Grace, but, equally, saints may be instructed more perfectly in the way. We know of one such congregation, in Mary Slessor’s old territory. There must be others! Pray that it may be so.

The Bible & TBS



Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807-1891)

Of the 400 plus languages in use in Nigeria, only 16 are possessed of a whole Bible, 39 have the New Testament, and some 60 more have smaller portions of Scripture. Of the provenance of these various Scripture materials I cannot speak particularly, but Samuel Crowther was very much involved in the production of the Yoruba Scriptures, Romans appearing in 1850 and the New Testament completed in 1862 – this was a first for any native speaker, and proved to be a durable and useful version.¹⁵

We can give thanks to the Lord of Heaven and Earth that the most accessible Bible, the English Authorised Version, is of use and much used here in Nigeria. English is the official language, and the Society has long dispatched Bibles, Testaments, calendars and portions, singly and in quantity, to Nigeria. More and more the trading difficulties hinder this work, and at times of the Islamic and military authorities holding power it has been impossible to secure funds from Nigeria. Nevertheless the ministry continues. In the Yoruba tongue TBS distributes just one tract, in Hausa just the Golden Thoughts Calendar each year. This calendar, as you would expect, is also distributed into Niger and Chad, and from time to time we discuss the possibility of producing it not only in the specially altered English alphabet, but also in the Ajami Script, more Arabic in character and thus potentially more useful in a Muslim setting.

Pray for this troubled, torn and tense land and peoples. The problems seem immense in every sphere, beyond the wrestlings of human wisdom to resolve, but not beyond the sovereign power of Him who hears prayer. Pray that the excited hope attending the renewed presidency of President Olusegun Obasanjo shall be fulfilled, and that the continuing work of Bible distribution shall be maintained, sustained and owned of God. Ponder the second verse of the Nigerian National Anthem:

O God of creation,
Direct our noble cause;
Guide our Leaders right:
Help our Youth the truth to know,
In love and honesty to grow,
And living just and true,
Great lofty heights attain,
To build a nation where peace and
justice reign.

The words of Psalm 67 come powerfully to mind: “That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations... *Then* shall the earth yield her increase; *and* God, *even* our own God, shall bless us” (vss. 2, 6). Pray that Samuel Crowther’s hope that the African Christian would know his Bible better than the African Muslim his Koran might be realised, not in statistical tables but in the fleshy tables of the heart.



TBS Bibles reach the hands of Nigerians

Endnotes

¹ *People speak lightly of ‘Niger-Congo’ as a cultural/linguistic area almost as Englishmen might speak of ‘Severn-Trent’. The Niger rises in the south of Guinea; the Congo rises, in its remotest tributaries, not far short of Zambia. This ‘region’ is the whole of Central Africa, over 4 million square miles, greater than the USA!*

² *The largest are South Africa, Sudan, Algeria and Congo (Zaire).*

³ *Ethnic composition (figures rounded) are: Hausa 21%, Yoruba 21%, Ibo 18%, Fulani 11%, Ibibio 5%, Kanun 4%, Edo 3%, Tiv 2%, Ijaw 1%, Bura 1%, Nupe 1%, others 10%.*

⁴ © Cambridge2000.com, reproduced with kind permission.

⁵ R. J. Rushdoony, *World History Notes (Fairfax VA: Thoburn, 1974)*, p. 21.

⁶ *And on ‘round the corner’ to Cameroon and Angola, then the Cape and India.*

⁷ *Just ‘Nigeria’ after that.*

⁸ *The following URL has a link to a recording of Mary Slessor speaking in Efik:*

<http://www.dundeecity.gov.uk/centlib/slessor/mary.htm>.

⁹ © Dundee Central Library, reproduced with kind permission.

¹⁰ *If the association of ‘Sudan’ with Nigeria seems strange, one must recall that a vast tract of land from Senegal to the Sudan was French West Africa, or ‘French Sudan’.*

¹¹ Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World, 5th ed. (Carlisle, UK: OM Publishing, 1993)*, p. 423.

¹² *The ground-breaking nature, one dare even say ‘clear leading of the Lord’, in Ajayi’s ministry amongst the Yoruba (and, in some degree, to the Egbo), a native speaker in the native tongue, was not adequately grasped or followed up, for reasons which make sad reading.*

¹³ *Ajayi lost eleven years’ notes of linguistic observations for use in further Biblical work when his house burned down, in 1862.*