



The Nigeria Area Up to 1800: A History Guide

SECTION A: THE NIGERIA AREA UP TO 1800

This section explores the rich history of the geographical area that constitutes modern-day Nigeria, focusing on its early inhabitants, civilizations, political structures, and interactions before the significant impact of European contact and the 19th-century jihads.

Foundations and Early Societies

This term lays the groundwork for understanding the diverse peoples and environments that shaped early Nigeria.

1. Land and Peoples of the Nigeria Area

- **Geographical Zones and the People:** Nigeria is characterized by diverse geographical zones, which influenced the distribution, settlement patterns, and way of life of its early inhabitants.
 - **Coastal Mangrove Swamps and Rainforest Belt (South):** Characterized by dense vegetation, high rainfall, and numerous rivers. Home to groups like the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Edo, Igbo, and Yoruba. Agriculture (root crops like yam, cassava), fishing, and trade were prominent.
 - **Derived Savannah/Guinea Savannah (Central Belt):** A transitional zone between forest and pure savannah. Home to groups like the Nupe, Tiv, Igala, Idoma, Ebira, and various Middle Belt groups. Mixed farming (grains and root crops), hunting, and animal husbandry were common.
 - **Sudan Savannah (North):** Characterized by open grasslands, sparse trees, and distinct wet and dry seasons. Home to groups like the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, and other northern groups. Agriculture (grains like millet, sorghum), pastoralism (cattle rearing), and long-distance trade flourished.
 - **Sahel Savannah (Extreme Northeast):** Arid, semi-desert conditions. Home to groups like the Kanuri (Borno). Trans-Saharan trade and specialized animal husbandry (camels) were important.
- **The People's Relationship with the Environment:** Early Nigerian societies developed close relationships with their environment, adapting their economies, settlements, and cultures to suit the available resources and climate.
 - **Agriculture:** Dominant activity, adapting crops to specific zones (e.g., yams/cassava in the South, grains in the North).
 - **Hunting and Gathering:** Essential in many areas, particularly in forest and savannah regions, supplementing agricultural output.

- **Fishing:** Crucial for riverine and coastal communities.
- **Animal Husbandry:** Prominent in the savannahs, with pastoralist groups moving livestock.
- **Settlement Patterns:** Influenced by water availability, fertile land, and defensible locations (e.g., hilltop settlements).
- **Relations and Integration Among the Peoples of Different Zones:** Despite diverse environments and cultures, there was significant interaction and integration among the peoples of pre-colonial Nigeria.
 - **Trade Networks:** Extensive internal trade routes linked different regions, exchanging products unique to each zone (e.g., kola nuts from forests for salt from the North, agricultural produce for crafts). This fostered economic interdependence.
 - **Migration:** People moved between zones for various reasons, including trade, seeking fertile lands, fleeing conflicts, or searching for new opportunities, leading to cultural diffusion.
 - **Cultural Exchange:** Ideas, technologies, artistic styles, and religious beliefs spread through trade, migration, and intermarriage.
 - **Political Alliances and Conflicts:** Interactions also involved diplomacy, alliances, and occasional conflicts over resources or power, shaping the boundaries and influence of early states.

2. Early Centres of Civilization

Several advanced societies emerged in the Nigeria area, leaving behind significant archaeological and historical evidence of complex civilizations.

- **Nok Civilization (c. 900 BCE – 200 CE):**
 - **Location:** Central Nigeria (modern-day Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba states).
 - **Key Feature:** Known for its distinctive terracotta figurines, often depicting human and animal forms with unique stylized features (e.g., triangular eyes, elaborate hairstyles).
 - **Significance:** Evidence of early iron smelting technology in West Africa (among the earliest in the world), sophisticated artistic expression, and complex social organization.
- **Daima (c. 600 CE onwards):**
 - **Location:** Borno State, near Lake Chad.
 - **Key Feature:** An archaeological site showing continuous settlement and development.
 - **Significance:** Provides insights into early iron-working, pottery, and mixed farming in the Chad Basin, contributing to understanding the origins of the Kanem-Borno empire.
- **Ife (c. 1000 CE onwards):**
 - **Location:** Southwestern Nigeria (modern-day Osun State).
 - **Key Feature:** Regarded as the spiritual homeland of the Yoruba people. Renowned for its naturalistic bronze, terracotta, and stone sculptures, particularly heads and full figures, depicting rulers and deities.
 - **Significance:** Represents a high point of West African art and craftsmanship. Its art influenced later Yoruba kingdoms like Oyo and Benin. It was a major religious and political centre.

- **Benin (c. 12th Century CE onwards):**
 - **Location:** Midwestern Nigeria (modern-day Edo State).
 - **Key Feature:** Famous for its elaborate brass plaques, sculptures, and ivory carvings that decorated the Oba's palace, depicting historical events, court life, and deities.
 - **Significance:** A powerful and centralized kingdom with sophisticated political, social, and artistic structures. Its art provides valuable historical records.
- **Igbo Ukwu (c. 9th Century CE):**
 - **Location:** Southeastern Nigeria (modern-day Anambra State).
 - **Key Feature:** Discovered in the 1930s, it revealed an ancient burial chamber and storehouse containing highly sophisticated bronze artifacts (cups, bowls, ornaments) and copper objects, showing advanced metallurgy (lost-wax casting).
 - **Significance:** Challenged the previous notion that complex metalwork in West Africa was solely influenced by the North or Europeans. It provided evidence of a rich and independent artistic tradition, and complex social structures in pre-colonial Igbo land.
- **Iwo Eleru (c. 11,000 BCE):**
 - **Location:** Western Nigeria (near Akure, Ondo State).
 - **Key Feature:** An archaeological site where the oldest human skeletal remains in West Africa were found.
 - **Significance:** Provides crucial evidence of early human habitation in the Nigeria area, dating back to the Stone Age, and sheds light on early human migrations and adaptations.

3. Origin and Formation of States in the Nigeria Area

Various factors, including trade, migration, military strength, and the influence of powerful leaders, led to the formation of complex political entities (states) across the Nigeria area.

- **Central Sudan – Kanuri and Hausa States:**
 - **Kanuri (Kanem-Borno Empire):** Emerged around Lake Chad, a crucial point for Trans-Saharan trade. Its wealth from trade, strong military (calvary), and adoption of Islam contributed to its centralized state formation. The Saifawa dynasty ruled for over 1,000 years.
 - **Hausa States:** (e.g., Kano, Zazzau, Katsina, Gobir) Developed as independent city-states in the savannah region. Their strategic location on Trans-Saharan trade routes (gold, kola nuts, salt, slaves) provided economic power. They also developed sophisticated administrative structures, adopted Islam, and had strong urban centers with specialized crafts.
- **Niger Benue Valley – Nupe, Jukun, Igala, Idoma, Tiv and Ebira:** This region saw the emergence of various states with unique characteristics.
 - **Nupe:** A kingdom in the Niger Valley known for its strong military and trade links, particularly with the Oyo Empire and Hausa states. Islam gained influence later.
 - **Jukun (Kwararafa):** A powerful empire in the Benue Valley, known for its military prowess and ritualistic kingship. They often challenged the Hausa states and Oyo.
 - **Igala (Idah Kingdom):** Located at the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, benefiting from riverine trade and controlling strategic trade routes. Their Attah (king) was a powerful figure.

- **Idoma and Ebira:** Generally had less centralized political systems compared to the large kingdoms, relying more on kinship and age-grade organizations, though they had influential chiefs and elders. The Tiv (as discussed in the pre-colonial polities section) were primarily acephalous.
- **Eastern Forest Belt – Igbo and Ibibio:**
 - **Igbo:** Predominantly organized into decentralized, autonomous village-republics (acephalous societies) with decision-making based on communal consensus, age grades, and title societies (e.g., Ozo). No large centralized empires existed.
 - **Ibibio:** Similar to the Igbo, they largely operated through village councils, secret societies (e.g., Ekpo, Idiong), and kinship groups, without large-scale political centralization.
- **Western Forest Belt – Yoruba and Edo:**
 - **Yoruba States (e.g., Oyo, Ife, Ijebu, Egba):** Emerged from urban centers, with a common cultural and linguistic heritage. They developed centralized monarchies headed by Obas, advised by councils of chiefs. Oyo Empire, with its powerful cavalry, expanded significantly in the 17th and 18th centuries, controlling a vast territory.
 - **Edo (Benin Kingdom):** A highly centralized kingdom led by the Oba of Benin. Its power was based on military strength, ritualistic kingship, and control over trade, particularly with European coastal traders. Its unique administrative structure and strong artistic tradition (bronzes) are noteworthy.
- **Coastal and Niger-Delta – Efik, Ijo, Itsekiri and Urhobo:** These communities, particularly after the 15th century, became important trading intermediaries between the interior and European traders.
 - **Efik (Calabar):** Developed powerful city-states based on trade (especially palm oil and slaves) and the Ekpe secret society, which served as a powerful regulatory and judicial body.
 - **Ijo (Niger Delta):** Lived in numerous independent city-states (e.g., Bonny, Opobo, Nembe, Brass) that thrived on trade and controlled strategic waterways. Their political structures often revolved around powerful "canoe houses" (trading organizations).
 - **Itsekiri (Warri Kingdom):** A centralized kingdom under an Olu (king) that played a major role in coastal trade.
 - **Urhobo:** Predominantly organized into decentralized polities based on kinship and age-grade systems, with influential elders and chiefs, similar to some Igbo polities.

4. Factors Influencing their Origin and Migration

- **Social and Political Organizations:** The desire for more effective social organization, defense, and economic control led to the formation of centralized states. Strong leadership, successful military campaigns, and effective administrative systems were key.
- **Inter-State Relations, Religion, War and Peace:**
 - **Trade:** The control of profitable trade routes (Trans-Saharan, Trans-Atlantic, and internal) was a major driver for state formation and expansion. States emerged to protect trade, impose taxes, and organize commercial activities.

- **Religion:** The introduction and spread of Islam (particularly in the North) influenced state formation by providing a unifying ideology, legal system (Sharia), and administrative framework (e.g., the Hausa states, Kanem-Borno). Traditional belief systems also provided legitimacy for rulers in other areas.
- **Warfare:** Constant warfare, driven by competition for resources, trade routes, or slaves, led to the consolidation of power in the hands of strong military leaders and the development of fortified settlements. The need for defense against external threats also spurred cooperation and state formation.
- **Peace and Stability:** Periods of relative peace allowed for population growth, agricultural development, and the flourishing of trade and crafts, which are prerequisites for state building.
- **Geographical Factors:** Access to fertile land, water resources (rivers for trade and agriculture), and defensible locations heavily influenced where states emerged and how they developed.
- **Demographic Factors:** Population growth and density often necessitated more complex social and political structures.