



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.

Economic Activities and External Influences

This term focuses on the economic life of pre-colonial Nigerian societies and the early external contacts that began to shape the region.

1. Economic Activities and Growth of States

The economic activities of the people of Nigeria were diverse, reflecting the various ecological zones, and played a crucial role in the growth and sustenance of states.

- **Agriculture:** The backbone of most economies.
 - **Hunting:** Provided protein and hides, especially in forest and savannah areas.
 - **Farming:** Primary activity.
 - **Root crops (yams, cassava, cocoyams):** Dominant in the South due to high rainfall.
 - **Grains (millet, sorghum, maize, rice):** Dominant in the North.
 - **Fishing:** Sustained riverine and coastal communities (e.g., Niger Delta, Lake Chad).
 - **Animal Husbandry:** Rearing of cattle, goats, sheep, and poultry, especially in the savannah regions by groups like the Fulani.
 - **Horticulture:** Cultivation of fruits, vegetables, and flowers for local consumption and trade.
- **Industries:** Indigenous industries flourished, demonstrating technological prowess and specialized skills.
 - **Pottery:** Widespread for domestic use, storage, and ritual purposes.
 - **Salt-making:** Important in areas with salt deposits (e.g., Benue Valley) or through evaporation in coastal areas.
 - **Iron Smelting:** A highly significant industry (as seen in Nok, Igbo Ukwu, Ife) for producing tools, weapons, and implements, enabling agricultural expansion and military strength.

- **Blacksmithing:** Forged iron into useful objects like hoes, knives, spears, and artistic items.
- **Leather-working:** Prominent in the North (e.g., Kano), producing hides, shoes, bags, and saddles.
- **Wood Carving:** For religious objects, household items, and architectural decorations (e.g., Yoruba, Edo, Igbo).
- **Cloth-making (Weaving and Dyeing):** Significant industries in many regions (e.g., Kano for indigo dyeing, Iseyin for Aso-Oke weaving, Akwete for Igbo weaving). Produced diverse fabrics for local use and trade.
- **Food Processing:** Milling of grains, processing of palm oil, preparation of traditional beverages, vital for daily sustenance.
- **Trade and Trade Routes:** Trade was the lifeline connecting different regions and fostering economic growth and state expansion.
 - **Local Trade:** Everyday exchange of goods within communities and between villages (e.g., agricultural produce for crafts).
 - **Regional Trade:** Linking different ecological zones within Nigeria, exchanging specialized products (e.g., kola nuts from the South for salt from the North, fish from the coast for grains from the savannah).
 - **Long-Distance Trade:** Connected states across vast distances within and beyond the Nigeria area.
 - **Trans-Saharan Trade:** The most prominent long-distance trade route connecting the Sudanic and Sahelian regions of Nigeria (e.g., Hausa states, Borno) with North Africa and the Middle East.
 - **Goods Traded:** Gold, kola nuts, slaves, leather goods, textiles (from Nigeria) for salt, horses, books, precious metals, firearms, and Islamic goods (from North Africa).
 - **Impact:** Brought immense wealth to northern states, facilitated the spread of Islam and Arabic literacy, influenced political organization, and led to the growth of major trade cities (e.g., Kano, Katsina).

2. External Influences

Early Nigeria was not isolated but engaged in various forms of external contact that shaped its development.

- **North Africans/Arabs:**
 - **Introduction and Spread of Islam:** Traders and scholars from North Africa introduced Islam to the Kanem-Borno Empire (from the 11th century) and the Hausa states (from the 14th century).
 - **Impact:** Islam brought new political ideas (e.g., Sharia law, centralized administration), literacy (Arabic script), architectural styles, educational systems, and strengthened trade networks. It became a unifying force and source of legitimacy for rulers in the North.
 - **Trans-Saharan Trade:** As discussed above, this trade was primarily facilitated by North African/Arab merchants, connecting West Africa to global trade networks. It was a major conduit for economic, cultural, and religious exchange.

- **Europeans:**

- **Early European Trade with the Coastal States:** Portuguese traders were the first Europeans to establish direct contact with the coastal communities of Nigeria in the late 15th century (e.g., Benin, Warri, Lagos, Opobo, Calabar).
 - **Goods Traded (initial phase):** European goods like brass manillas, textiles, spirits, guns, and gunpowder were exchanged for African products like pepper, ivory, gold, and later, increasingly, slaves.
 - **Impact:** Introduced new trade goods, strengthened the power of coastal chiefs who acted as intermediaries, and began to shift economic focus from the Trans-Saharan routes to the Atlantic.
- **The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (c. 16th – 19th Centuries):**
 - **Origin:** European demand for labor in their New World colonies (Americas and Caribbean) for plantations (sugar, tobacco, cotton) led to the massive forced migration of Africans across the Atlantic.
 - **Organization:** European traders established factories/barracoons on the coast. African intermediaries (coastal chiefs and traders) raided the interior or bought captives from internal conflicts, transporting them to the coast for sale.
 - **Impact on Nigeria (Pre-1800, and leading up to its abolition):**
 - **Demographic Loss:** Millions of able-bodied individuals were forcibly removed, leading to severe population decline and disruption of social structures.
 - **Economic Disruption:** While some African intermediaries gained wealth, the trade diverted resources from productive activities, discouraged agricultural development, and fostered economic dependence on European goods. Indigenous industries often declined.
 - **Increased Warfare and Insecurity:** The demand for slaves fueled internal conflicts, raids, and the rise of militaristic states that specialized in slave raiding, destabilizing communities.
 - **Erosion of Morality and Trust:** The trade led to suspicion, fear, and a breakdown of traditional values, as communities turned on each other.
 - **Introduction of New Crops:** Some new crops from the Americas (e.g., maize, cassava, groundnuts) were introduced, which later became staple foods.
 - **Rise of Coastal States:** States like Benin, Oyo, and the Niger Delta city-states gained power and wealth as major participants and beneficiaries of the trade (though ultimately, the trade's negative impacts far outweighed any short-term gains).