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The History of Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria, often described as the "Giant of Africa," is a nation whose story is as vast and varied as its landscapes and peoples. Stretching from the savannas and Sahel in the north to the lush rainforests of the south, and bordered by the Atlantic Ocean in the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria is home to a remarkable tapestry of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. At over 200 million strong, its population is the largest in Africa, and its history is marked by periods of brilliance, adversity, conflict, and resilience.

The roots of Nigerian civilization reach deep into prehistory, with evidence of human settlement dating back tens of thousands of years. From the enigmatic stone tools and terracotta fragments of ancient peoples to the emergence of iconic cultures such as Nok, life in the region has always been dynamic. Over millennia, peoples of the area developed sophisticated agrarian societies, forged powerful kingdoms, and engaged in far-reaching trade that connected them to the wider world. The arrival of Islam in the north and Christianity in the south contributed to the evolving religious and cultural mosaic that defines Nigeria.

Yet the forces of history—migration, conquest, trade, and technology—shaped more than religious and social life. The formation of early states such as the Hausa city-states, the Oyo and Benin empires, and the Nri kingdom helped foster political systems and artistic traditions that still resonate in Nigeria today. The coming of Europeans in the late 15th century, however, transformed everything. The transatlantic slave trade, and later British colonialism, left indelible scars, reorganizing societies and economies, redrawing political boundaries, and altering the very identity of what would become Nigeria.

Gaining independence from Britain in 1960 was both a triumph and a new trial. The hope and excitement of self-rule soon gave way to turbulence: ethnic tensions, political strife, military coups, and a devastating civil war that tested the fabric of the young nation. Through hardship and reconciliation, Nigeria moved forward, buoyed by newfound oil wealth but also challenged by corruption, inequality, and the complicated legacies of its colonial past.

This book explores Nigeria's journey from its earliest beginnings to the present day. It seeks to illuminate the complexity of Nigerian history: its triumphs and tragedies, its people and leaders, its diverse traditions, and the ongoing search for unity and progress in an often turbulent world. As we follow Nigeria's story across the centuries—from ancient settlements to the rise and fall of empires, from colonial rule to independence and today's vibrant, sometimes fractious democracy—we come to see not just a sequence of events, but the emergence of a dynamic nation whose

history remains intimately connected to the destinies of Africa and the wider globe.

The following chapters seek not only to recount what happened but to understand why and how. Drawing on archaeological evidence, oral histories, documentary records, and the lived experiences of Nigeria's many peoples, this book offers a comprehensive portrait of a nation both ancient and modern. In doing so, it challenges us to appreciate the depth of Nigeria's past, the resilience of its people, and the promise that still lies ahead.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Peoples of Nigeria: Geography and Early Human Settlement

Nigeria, a nation of immense diversity and vibrant history, is situated in West Africa, nestled between latitudes 4°N and 14°N and longitudes 3°E and 15°E. This geographic placement puts it squarely in the Northern Hemisphere and the tropical zone, endowing it with a climate that ranges from humid equatorial in the south to arid Sahel in the north. Its strategic location, bordering Benin to the west, Niger to the north, Chad and Cameroon to the east, and the expansive Gulf of Guinea to the south, has historically made it a crossroads of trade, culture, and human migration.

Covering a substantial land area of 923,768 square kilometers, Nigeria is the 14th largest country in Africa and is almost four times the physical size of the United Kingdom. This vast expanse gives rise to a remarkable variety of landscapes and ecosystems, each playing a role in shaping the lives and histories of its inhabitants. From the coastal plains and mangrove swamps of the south to the undulating savannahs and plateaus of the interior, Nigeria's geography is a dynamic backdrop to its compelling story.

The country's physical relief can be broadly divided into highland and lowland regions. The lowlands, generally below 300 meters above sea level, include the Sokoto Plains in the northwest, the Chad Basin/Borno Plains in the northeast, and a coastal plain averaging 80 kilometers in width that stretches from the Benin border to the Niger Delta. These areas, particularly the fertile riverine plains, have historically been crucial for agriculture and settlement.

Conversely, the highland regions rise above 300 meters and include prominent features such as the North Central Highlands, home to the Jos Plateau, which stands at an elevation of 750 to 1700 meters above sea level. Other notable highlands include the rugged terrains southwest of the Niger River, the Mambilla Plateau, Obudu Plateau, and the mountains along the border with Cameroon, where some peaks exceed 2,000 meters. These elevated areas often boast cooler, more temperate climates compared to the hotter lowlands, making them distinct ecological zones.

Dominating the Nigerian landscape are the broad, fertile valleys of the Niger and Benue Rivers. The Niger, Africa's third-longest river, enters Nigeria from the northwest, while its main tributary, the Benue, flows in from the northeast. These two mighty rivers converge in Lokoja, in the south-central region, before continuing south and emptying into the Atlantic Ocean via the vast Niger Delta. This confluence is not merely a geographical landmark but a historical nexus, serving as a vital artery for

trade, transportation, and communication for millennia.

The Niger River's meandering course, often described as a boomerang or an "S" shape, is one of its most unusual features, flowing away from the Atlantic before curving sharply southeast to meet it again. The river's significance extends beyond its impressive length; it is a source of water and livelihood for over 100 million people, supporting diverse aquatic ecosystems with over 200 fish species. Its floodplains are crucial for agriculture, particularly for crops like rice, millet, and sorghum, and for providing dry season pastures for livestock.

Nigeria's climate is primarily tropical, characterized by distinct wet and dry seasons. The far south experiences a tropical rainforest climate with heavy, abundant rainfall, often exceeding 2000 mm annually, and in some parts of the Niger Delta, over 4000 mm. This region experiences a double rainfall maximum, meaning two peak rainy periods. Moving northward, the climate transitions to a savannah type, with annual rainfall ranging from 500 to 1500 mm. The far north, bordering the Sahel, has an almost desert-like climate, receiving less than 500 mm of rainfall per year.

This climatic variation directly influences Nigeria's vegetation. The wetter south is dominated by forests, including saline water swamps, freshwater swamps, and tropical evergreen rainforests. As one moves north, the vegetation gradually shifts to various types of savannah, characterized by grasslands and scattered trees, before transitioning to the drier Sahel savanna in the extreme north. These diverse ecological zones have profoundly impacted human settlement patterns, agricultural practices, and the types of societies that developed across the region.

Evidence of human habitation in the region now known as Nigeria dates back at least to 13,000 BCE, with some archaeological findings suggesting activity as far back as 8000 BCE. Fossil remains discovered in Iwo Eleru, near Akure in southwestern Nigeria, around 9000 BCE, provide some of the earliest insights into early human occupation. These early inhabitants were primarily hunter-gatherers, skillfully navigating the diverse environments to sustain themselves.

The transition from a nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyle to more settled agricultural communities began to take shape between 3000 and 500 BCE. This transformative period saw the gradual development of agriculture, with yam cultivation emerging as a significant staple food in the forest clearings of the south. The adoption of farming techniques allowed for more permanent settlements and laid the groundwork for the development of complex societies.

Beyond the cultivation of food, early Nigerian societies also demonstrated remarkable technological advancements. Archaeological findings at sites like Lejja suggest that iron metallurgy developed between 2631 BCE and 2458 BCE. This mastery of iron smelting, a crucial step in human technological progress, enabled the creation of more

durable tools and weapons, further shaping the trajectory of these nascent civilizations.

The Dufuna canoe, discovered in northern Nigeria and dated to around 6556-6388 BCE and 6164-6005 BCE, stands as a testament to the sophisticated engineering and navigational skills of these ancient peoples. It is the oldest known boat in Africa and the second oldest worldwide, highlighting the early importance of water transport and possibly trade networks in the region. Such discoveries continually push back the timeline of advanced human activity in Nigeria, revealing a deep and complex prehistory.

These early societies were not isolated but were part of broader regional developments. The movement of people, technologies, and ideas across the West African landscape contributed to the rich tapestry of cultures that would eventually emerge. The sustained human presence and the gradual evolution of technological and agricultural practices laid the essential foundations for the flourishing of the ancient civilizations and powerful kingdoms that would define Nigeria's subsequent history.

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