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Pathways to Nigerian Peoples and Culture

Vincent G. Nyoyoko

PATHWAYS TO NIGERIAN PEOPLES AND CULTURE

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University of Port Harcourt Press Ltd.
University of Port Harcourt, Choba

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Akwa Ibom State University

ISBN: 978 – 978 – 51319 – 9 – 4

Published in Nigeria

By University of Port Harcourt Press

University of Port Harcourt Post Office Box 50

University of Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt, Nigeria

E-mail:uppltd@yahoo.com

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In Microsoft Word 2007 by University of Port Harcourt Press Ltd.

CHAPTER TWO

NIGERIAN CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

**By
Essien Ukpe**

Nigerian Culture

Nigerian culture is as old as 2000 years and what makes it stand out is its diversity. It is as multi-ethnic as the people in Nigeria. The people of Nigeria still cherish their traditional languages, music, dance and literature. Nigeria comprises of three large ethnic groups, which are Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo. However, there are other ethnic groups as well. Thus culture in Nigeria is most positively multi-ethnic.

The culture of Nigeria gives a lot of value to different types of arts, which primarily include ivory carving, grass weaving, wood carving, leather and calabash making, pottery, painting, cloth weaving and glass and metal works.

Nigerian culture includes varieties and types of clothing as there are different groups of people living in the country. What is common in their dressing style is the conservativeness.

Nigerian culture gives a lot of importance in treating guests with utmost care and warmth. The hospitality of the people represents this tradition. That is why people are not supposed to say thank you, when they are offered food. Among the games, Nigerians enjoy soccer the most. Polo, cricket, swimming and wrestling are popular among the affluent classes.

Festivals of Nigeria

Nigerian festivals owe their origin to the various traditional religions peculiar to various regions. These festivals have been celebrated since the birth of the major religions in Nigeria. The various festivals of Nigeria are celebrated during specific occasions and periods throughout the year with gaiety. These Nigerian festivals are denotative elements of Nigerian culture.

Masquerades and dances play important roles during these festivals. Some of the outstanding Nigerian festivals are the Eyo, the Shadi, Durbar, Shango, Ekpo, Ekpe, Obon, Ebri, New Yam festival and so on.

The Eyo festival is celebrated only by the Lagos people. It is also said to be the precursor of the present day Brazil carnival. All the main roadways are blocked on the Eyo day to allow the procession pass freely. The masquerade starts from Idumota to Iga Idunganran. Those who take part in this festival, pay homage to the Oba of Lagos. Eyo festival is mainly held on the last burial rites of an eminent chief, but is also held when occasion demands it.

The Sharo or the Shadi festival is derived from the Fulani culture. The word Sharo means flogging. The festival features unmarried men accompanied by beautiful girls to the center ring. Now a challenger starts to whip the opponent and this continues. The mob bursts out in joy and drumming; and singing starts accordingly to cheer the fighters. The one wreathing in pain is considered to be the loser and coward.

The Arugungu fishing festival is an annual festival and is the most vibrant compared to the other festivals. The festival is celebrated in the Arugungu town of Kebbi state. It is one of the tourist attractions in Nigeria. The festival was celebrated as a tribute to Sultan Dan Mu'azu, when he visited the area in 1934. Since then it is celebrated every year around February and March. In this festival local people, armed with fishnets get into the water. They are then accompanied by drummers who with loud beating of their drums drive the fishes to the shallow waters. Canoe racing, fishing bare handedly, diving competitions are also a part of this festival.

The Antilogwu dance is a remarkable art form. The dance is done with the help of foot stomping steps. Great training is needed to perform this dance and is performed among the Igbos of Anambra state. The Osun festival is celebrated in the Yorubaland mainly for the worship of Sango, the god of thunder. This Benin festival is the harvest festival and is celebrated at the end of the monsoon season, when the harvests are gathered.

The Durbar festival showcases the horsemanship of the people. Durbar means military parade. The Emir used to invite the nationals to exhibit their horsemanship and valour. Since then it has become a respectable festival. Today the Katsina Durbar is the most remarkable and glorious of all festivals in the North.

Ekpo

The powerful Ekpo Society controls almost every facet of Annang and Ibibio life. The Ekpo, which is strictly for men, is technically in charge of initiations and directing ceremonies venerating ancestors, who are the most important influence in Ibibio culture. Masked Ekpo dancers direct funerals to insure that the dead receive the proper respect. If they do not, punishment can be swift and brutal, and the Ekpo, as practiced by the Annang and Ibibio, who number over one million, has sometimes been described as "police brutality," such is their stranglehold on political and social power. In fact, the Ekpo was so dominant during British occupation that colonial officials just relented and allowed the society to operate. Ekpo masks can be serene and beautiful, or fierce and frightening. Annang carvers are highly respected throughout the Niger Delta and Cross River areas, and they are often asked to carve masks for other groups, like the Boki, Ibibio, and Ogoni. The Ogoni, in fact, do not have an Ekpo Society, but enjoy Ekpo dances, and have, on occasion, purchased masks from Annang carvers. Eka Ekpo mask is large and menacing, with its dramatic horns sweeping backwards, and causes great fear among the villagers.

Ekpe

Ekpe, also known as Egbe (Leopard), is a secret society flourishing chiefly among the Efiks of the Cross River State, the Oron, of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, as well as Nigerians Efik/Oron in the diaspora, such as in Cuba. The society is still active at the beginning of the 21st century, allegedly only playing a ceremonial role. There are two distinct but related societies, the primary one in the Cross River and Akwa Ibom areas, and the secondary one among the Southern and Eastern Igbo groups.

Members of the Ekpe invented *Nsibidi*, a script. Ekpe is not the same thing as Ekpo, or Ekong, which are other societies in the Cross River basin, especially in Akwa Ibom State. Annang do not practice Ekpe.

Ekpe is a mysterious spirit who is supposed to live in the jungle and to preside at the ceremonies of the society. Members of the Ekpe society are said to act as messengers of the ancestors or *Ikan*. The economics of the society is based on paying tribute to the village ancestors. Only males can join, boys being initiated about the age of puberty. Members are bound by oath of secrecy, and fees on entrance are payable. The Ekpe-men are ranked in seven or nine grades, for promotion to each of which fresh initiation ceremonies, fees and oaths are necessary. The society combines a kind of freemasonry with political and law-enforcing aims. For instance, any member wronged in an Ekpe district, that is, one dominated by the society, has only to address an Ekpe-man or beat the Ekpe drum in the Ekpe-house, or blow Ekpe as it is called, i.e. sound the Ekpe horn, before the hut of the wrong-doer, and the whole machinery of the society is put in force to see justice done. Ekpe members always wear masks when performing their police duties, and although individuals may nonetheless be recognized, fear of retribution from the *ikan* stops people from accusing those members who may overstep their limits. Formerly the society earned a bad reputation due to what the British viewed as the barbarous customs that were intermingled with its rites. Nonetheless, the British authorities, prior to 1960, made use of the society in enforcing order and in helping the acceptance of European technology and techniques, such as sanitation.

Social importance is attached to the highest ranks of Ekpe-men, called *Amama*. At least in the past, very large sums, sometimes more than a thousand pounds, were paid to attain these upper levels. The trade-off is that the *Amama* often control the majority of the community wealth. The *Amama* often appropriate hundreds of acres of palm trees for their own use and, with the profits they earn, ensure that their sons achieve comparable rank, which has the effect of limiting access to economic gain for other members of the community.

The Ekpe society requires that its initiates sponsor feasts for the town, which foster the appearance of the redistribution of wealth by providing the poor with food and drink.

The Ekpe-house, an oblong building like the nave of a church, usually stands in the middle of the villages. The walls are of clay elaborately painted inside and ornamented with clay figures in relief. Inside are wooden images to which reverence is paid.

At Ekpe festivals masked dancers perform. Some of the older masks show horns and filed teeth. Non initiates and women are not allowed to come in contact with the masked dancers.

New Yam Festival

The New Yam festival is an annual harvest festival by the people all over Akwa Ibom State, held at the end of the rainy season in early August. The festival is practiced throughout West Africa other African countries and beyond, symbolizing the conclusion of a harvest and the beginning of the next work cycle. The celebration is a very culturally based occasion, tying individual communities together as essentially agrarian and dependent on yam.

Yams are the first crop to be harvested, and are the most important crop of the region. The evening prior to the day of the festival, all old yams (from the previous year's harvest) are symbolically consumed or discarded. The next day, only dishes of yam are served, as the festival is symbolic of the abundance of the produce.

Traditionally, the role of eating the first yam is performed by the oldest man in the community or the king. This man also offers the yams to God, deities and ancestors. It is believed that their position bestows the privilege of being intermediaries between their communities and the gods of the land. The rituals are meant to express the gratitude of the community to the gods for making the harvest possible, and they are widely followed despite more modern changes due to the influence of Christianity in the area.

The day is symbolic of enjoyment after the cultivation season, and the plenty is shared with friends and well-wishers. A variety of festivities mark the eating of new yam. Folk dances, masquerades, parades, and parties create an experience that some participants characterize as "art"; the colorful festival is a spectacle of exhibited joy, thanks, and community display. Palm oil is used to eat the yam. The festival also shares some similarities with the Asian Mid-Autumn Festival, as both are based on the cycles of the moon and are essentially community harvest festivals.

The Nigerian festivals have become the tradition of Nigeria, worth seeing. Besides, there are several other local festivals celebrated with gaiety and fun.

Nigerian Eating Habits

Food in Nigeria is traditionally eaten with hands. However, with the growing influence of Western culture, forks and spoons are becoming more common, even in remote villages. Whether people eat with their hands or cutleries, it is considered dirty and rude to eat using the left hand.

The ingredients in traditional eating habit vary from region to region; most Nigerian cuisine tends to be based around a few staple foods accompanied by stew. In the south, crops such as corn, yams, cassava and sweet potatoes form the base of the diet. These crops are often pounded into a thick, sticky dough or paste. This is often served with a palm oil-based stew made with chicken, beef, goat, tomatoes, okra, onions, bitter leaves, or whatever meats and vegetables might be on hand. Fruits such as papaya, pineapples, coconuts, oranges, mangoes, and bananas also are very common in the tropical south.

In the north, grains such as millet, sorghum, and corn are boiled into a porridge-like dish that forms the basis of the diet. This is served with an oil-based soup usually flavoured with onions, okra, and tomatoes. Sometimes meat is included, though among the Hausas, it is often reserved for special occasions. Thanks to the Fulani cattle herders, fresh milk and yogurt are common even though there may not be refrigeration.

Alcohol is very popular in the south but less so in the north, where there is a heavy Islamic influence. Perhaps the most popular form of alcohol is palm wine, a tart alcoholic drink that comes from palm trees. Palm wine is often distilled further to make strong, gin-like liquor popularly called *ogogoro*. Nigerian breweries also produce several kinds of beer and liquor.

Food plays a central role in the rituals of virtually all ethnic groups in Nigeria. Special ceremonies would not be complete without participants sharing in a meal. Normally it is considered rude not to invite guests to share in a meal when they visit; it is even more so if the visitors were invited to attend a special event such as a marriage or a naming ceremony.

Nigerian Art

Nigerian art traditionally served a social or religious purpose and did not exist for the sake of art per se. For example, dance was used to teach or to fulfill some ritualistic goal. Sculpture was used in blessings, in healing rituals, or to ward off bad luck. With increasing modernization, however, Nigerian art is becoming less oriented to a particular purpose. In some cases, Nigerians have abandoned whole forms of art because they no longer serve contemporary purpose. For example, the elaborate tombstones once widely produced by the Annang, Efik and Ibibio are becoming increasingly rare as Western-style cemeteries are replacing traditional burial grounds.

The government has recognized this decline in Nigerian art. In an attempt to promote Nigerian nationalism through art, it has launched some programs, such as the All-Nigeria Festival of Arts, to revitalize the Nigerian art world. Many wealthy Nigerians looking to recapture their roots, as well as Western tourists and collectors looking for an African art experience, are willing to spend money on Nigerian art. This has led to a slight revival of the art industry.

Nigeria has a long and incredibly rich literary history. Nigerians are traditionally storytellers. Much of pre-colonial history in Nigeria is the result of stories handed down from generation to generation.

With colonization and the introduction of reading, writing, and the English language, Nigerian storytellers soon began sharing their talents with a worldwide audience. Perhaps Nigeria's most famous writer is Wole Soyinka, who won the 1986 Nobel Prize for literature. His most famous works include *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Swamp Dwellers*, and *The Lion and the Jewel*. Other famous Nigerian authors include Chinua Achebe, whose *Things Fall Apart* is a favourite among Western-style schools as an example of the problems inflicted on African societies during colonization, and Ben Okri, whose novel *The Famished Road* won Britain's 1991 Booker Prize.

Nigeria is famous for its sculpture. The bronze work of the ancient cities of Ife and Benin can be found in museums all over the world. These areas in southern Nigeria still produce large amounts of bronze castings. Woodcarvings and terra-cotta sculptures are also popular.

Nigerians are expert dyers, weavers, and tailors. They produce massive quantities of beautiful, rich, and colourful textiles. However, the majority of these are sold primarily for everyday wear and not as examples of art. For her artistic raffia products, Ikot Ekpene in Akwa Ibom State, South-South Nigeria has been code-named the "Raffia City of Nigeria".

Dance and music are perhaps the two most vibrant forms of Nigerian art. Notable examples of these are the Uta, Ikon and Oduoduok Ekpo. These Nigerian musical types are dependent on strong rhythms supplied by countless drums and percussion instruments. Highlife is a type of music heavily influenced by Western culture. It sounds like an Africanized version of American big band or ballroom music. Afro-beat combines African rhythms and melodies with jazz and soul. One of Nigeria's best-known Afro-beat artists, Late Fela Ransome Kuti, was heavily influenced by American artists such as James Brown. Palm wine music gets its name from the palm wine saloons where it is traditionally heard. Its fast-paced, frenzied rhythms reflect the rambunctious nature of many palm wine bars.

Perhaps Nigeria's most popular form of music is *juju*, which uses traditional drums and percussion instruments to back up vocals and complicated guitar work. Popular *juju* artists include King Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, and Shina Peters.

Marriage Systems

There are three types of marriages in Nigeria today: religious marriage, civil marriage, and traditional marriage. A Nigerian couple may decide to take part in one or all of these marriages. Religious marriages, usually Christian or Muslim, are conducted according to the norms of the respective religious teachings and take place in a church or a mosque. Christian males are allowed only one wife, while Muslim men can take up to four wives. Civil official weddings take place in a government registry office. Men are allowed only one wife under a civil wedding, regardless of religion. Traditional marriages usually are held at the wife's house and are performed according to the customs of the ethnic group involved. Most ethnic groups traditionally allow more than one wife.

While Western ways of courtship and marriage are not unheard of, the power of traditional values and the strong influence of the family mean that traditional ways are usually followed, even in the cities and among the elite. According to old customs, women do not have much choice of whom they married, though the numbers of arranged marriages are declining. It is also not uncommon for women to marry in their teens, often to a much older man. In instances where there are already one or more wives, it is the first wife's responsibility to look after the newest wife and help her integrate into the family.

Many Nigerian ethnic groups follow the practice of offering a bride price for an intended wife. Unlike a dowry, in which the woman would bring something of material value to the marriage, a bride price is some form of compensation the husband must pay before he can marry a wife. A bride price can take the form of money, cattle, wine, or other valuable goods paid to the woman's family, but it also can take a more subtle form. Men might contribute money to the education of an intended wife or help to establish her in a small-scale business or agricultural endeavor.

This form of bride price is often incorporated as part of the wooing process. While women who leave their husbands will be welcomed back into their families, they often need a justification for breaking the marriage. If the husband is seen as having treated his wife well, he can expect to have the bride price repaid.

Divorce is quite common in Nigeria. Marriage is more of a social contract made to ensure the continuation of family lines rather than a union based on love and emotional connections. However, due to Western influence, the number of pre-arranged marriages are reducing. Most marriages today are contracted on the basis of love. Despite this however, it is not uncommon, in village settings, for a husband and wife to live in separate homes and to be extremely independent of one another. In most ethnic groups, either the man or the woman can end the marriage. If the woman leaves her husband, she will often be taken as a second or third wife by another man. If this is the case, the new husband is responsible for repaying the bride price to the former husband. Children of a divorced woman are normally accepted into the new family as well, without any problems.

The majority of Nigerian families are very large by Western standards. Many Nigerian men take more than one wife. In some ethnic groups, the greater the number of children, the greater a man's standing in the eyes of his peers. Family units of ten or more are not uncommon.

In most Nigerian cultures, the father has his crops to tend to, while his wives will have their own jobs, whether they be tending the family garden, processing palm oil, or selling vegetables in the local market. Children may attend school. When they return home, the older boys will help their father with his work, while the girls and younger boys will help their mothers.

For many Nigerian ethnic groups, such as the Hausa and the Igbo, inheritance is basically a male affair. Though women have a legal right to inheritance in Nigeria, they often receive nothing. Property and wealth are usually passed on to sons, if they are old enough, or to other male relatives, such as brothers or uncles.

For the Fulani, if a man dies, his brother inherits his property and his wife. The wife usually returns to live with her family, but she may move in with her husband's brother and become his wife.

While men dominate Igbo society, women play an important role in kinship. All Igbos, men and women, have close ties to their mother's clan, which usually is in a different village. When an Igbo man dies, the body is usually sent back to his mother's village to be buried with his mother's kin. If an Igbo is disgraced or cast out of his community, his mother's kin will often take him in.

For the Hausa, however, there is not much of a sense of wide-ranging kinship. Hausa society is based on the nuclear family. There is a sense of a larger extended family, including married siblings and their families, but there is little kinship beyond that. However, the idea of blood being thicker than water is very strong in Hausa society. For this reason, many Hausas will try to stretch familial relationships to the broader idea of clan or tribe to diffuse tensions between or among neighbours.

Nigerian Architecture

Nigerian architecture is as diverse as its people. In rural areas, houses are often designed to accommodate the environment in which the people live. The Ijaw live in the Niger Delta region, where dry land is very scarce. To compensate for this, many Ijaw homes are built on stilts over creeks and swamps, with travel between them done by boat. The houses are made of wood and bamboo and topped with a roof made of fronds from raffia palms. The houses are very airy, to allow heat and the smoke from cooking fires to escape easily.

Igbo houses are made of bamboo frames held together with vines and mud and covered with banana leaves. They often blend into the surrounding forest and can be easily missed if you do not know where to look. Men and women traditionally live in separate houses.

Much of the architecture in the north is heavily influenced by Muslim culture. Homes are typically geometric, mud-walled structures, often with Muslim markings and decorations. The Hausa build large, walled compounds housing several smaller huts. The entryway into the compound is via a large hut built into the wall of the compound. This is the hut of the father or head male-figure in the compound.

Religion

Nigerians give great importance to religion. 45% of the population is Christian, 45% Muslim and the rest 10% is a mixture of indigenous religions. However, as Nigeria culture is multi-ethnic, there exist quite a number of deities.

The people of Nigeria traditionally used to worship many inanimate objects. Ancestor worship was also largely practiced by many tribal groups of Nigeria. The most popular among the innumerable ethnic groups in Nigeria are Ibo or Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-Faluni. Yoruba people mostly occupy the southern parts on Nigeria. The Ibo or Igbo group stays in the south eastern states of Nigeria. The Hausa-Faluni stays in the northern Nigeria.

While Muslims can be found in all parts of Nigeria, their strongest footholds are among the Hausas and the Yorubas. Islam in Nigeria is similar to Islam throughout the world. It is based on the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, which are outlined in the Qur'an.

Christianity is most prevalent in the southern part of Nigeria. The vast majority of Igbos are Christians, as are many Yorubas. The most popular forms of Christianity in Nigeria include Anglican, Presbyterian, American Southern Baptist, and Methodist. Also, there are large pockets of Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Conflict with the way some missionaries administered the churches during colonial times also created several breakaway African-Christian churches. Most of these adhere to the doctrines of Western churches but have introduced African music and tradition in their services. Some have even eased Christian restrictions on polygamy.

Relations between Christians and Muslims are tense in many areas. Since late 1999, numerous clashes between the two have led to thousands of deaths. The northern city of Kaduna has been the flash point for many of these riots, as local leaders continue to contemplate instituting Shari'a law in the region. Demonstrations by Christians against the idea often lead to violent confrontations with Muslims. The debate over Shari'a law and the violence accompanying it continue in many of the northern states.

Between 2011 and 2012, a violent Islamic sect, the Boko Haram terrorized the country by bombing several Christian churches and other strategic places including the UN office with the sole aim of Islamizing the country.

While Islam and Christianity are the dominant religions in Nigeria, neither is completely free of influence from indigenous religions. Most people who consider themselves good Muslims or good Christians often also follow local religious practices. This makes up for perceived shortcomings in their religion. Most indigenous religions are based on a form of ancestor worship in which family members who have passed into the spirit world are believed to be able to influence things in the world of the living. This mixing of traditional ways with Islam has led to groups such as the Bori cult, who use spirit possession as a way to understand why people are suffering in this life. The mixing of traditional ways with Christianity has led to the development of the Aladura Church. Aladura priests follow basic Christian doctrines but also use prophecy, healing, and charms to ward off witchcraft.

Some Nigerians follow the teachings of purely indigenous religions. Most of these religions share the idea that one supreme god created the earth and its people, but has left people to decide their own paths in life. Followers of the traditional Yoruba religion believe that hundreds of spirits or minor gods have taken the place of the supreme god in influencing the daily lives of individuals. Many Yoruba slaves who were taken to the Caribbean and the Americas took this religion with them. There it was used as the basis of Santeria and Voodoo.

Because the vast majority of Igbos converted to Christianity during colonialism, few practice the traditional Igbo religion, which is based on hundreds of gods, instead of a single creator.

According to Muslim and Christian traditions, preference is given to males to serve as officials in these religions. For most indigenous religions, priests and priestesses are common. Traditional priests and priestesses get their powers and influence from their ability to be possessed by their god or by their ability to tell the future while or to heal. In the Igbo religion men serve as priests to Igbo goddesses, while women serve as priestesses to Igbo gods. While both men and women can rank high in the Yoruba religion, women usually are among the most respected of traditional priests.

Because many of the indigenous religions are based on various spirits or minor gods, each with influence over a specific area of nature, many of the traditional rituals are based on paying homage to these gods and spirits. Likewise, the area of control for a spirit also marks the places that are holy to that spirit. For example, a tribe's water spirit may have a specific pond or river designated as its holy place.

The Kalabari, Okrika, and Ikwerre tribes of the Niger Delta region all have festivals in honor of water spirits sacred to their peoples. The Yoruba hold a twenty-day Shango festival each year to honor their god of thunder. Many Igbo consider it bad luck to eat yams from the new harvest until after the annual Yam Festival, a harvest celebration held in honor of the Igbo earth goddess, Ani.

Socio-Religious Problems

Perhaps Nigeria's greatest social problem is the internal violence plaguing the nation. Inter-ethnic fighting throughout the country, religious rioting between Muslims and non-Muslims over the creation of Shari'a law (strict Islamic law) in the northern states, and political confrontations between ethnic minorities and backers of oil companies often spark bloody confrontations that can last days or even months.

When violence of this type breaks out, national and state police try to control it. However, the police themselves are often accused of some of the worst violence. In some instances, curfews and martial law have been imposed in specific areas to try to stem outbreaks of unrest.

Death and Burial

Christian and Muslim Nigerians believe that following death, a person's soul is released and judged by God before hopefully going on to Heaven or hell. Many traditional religions, especially those of the eastern tribes, believe in reincarnation. In these tribes, people believe that the dead will come back as a member of his or her mother's or sister's family. Many in-depth ceremonies are necessary to prepare the body before burial. For example, if the person was inflicted with some physical disability, steps would be taken to prevent it from being passed on to him in the next life. An infertile woman may have her abdomen cut open before burial or a blind man may have a salve made from special leaves placed over his eyes.

Regardless of religion, Nigerians bury their dead. This is customary among Christians and Muslims, but it is also based on traditional beliefs that the body should be returned to the earth that sustained it during life.

Muslims are buried with their heads facing the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. For others, it is customary to bury a man with his head turned toward the east, so he can see the rising sun. A woman is buried facing west, so she will know when the sun sets and when it is time to prepare dinner for her husband in the next life. Some tribes also cover the body with black earth during burial because many believe that red earth will result in skin blemishes in the next life.

The ethnic groups in eastern Nigeria believe that the more music and dancing at a funeral, the better that person's chances of a successful afterlife.

The size of funerals depends on the social standing of the deceased. Men are expected to set aside money that will be used to ensure they have an elaborate funeral. Women, children, and adolescents on the other hand, are not given elaborate funerals.

Education

Christian missionaries brought Western-style education to Nigeria as Christianity quickly spread throughout the south. The mission schools created an educated African elite who also sought increased contact with Europe and a Westernization of Nigeria.

Historically, Nigerians have been very interested in higher education. The lack of universities providing quality education equal to that in Britain was a major component of the social reforms that led to Nigeria's independence. Today there are ninety five universities in Nigeria. The majority of these are government-run, but the government has recently approved the creation of private universities in the country.

All Nigerian children are supposed to have access to a local elementary school. While the government aims to provide universal education for both boys and girls, the number of girls in school is usually much lower than the number of boys. Except for free and compulsory education provided by the administration of some governors like Governor Godswill Akpabio of Akwa Ibom State, sending every child in a family to school can often put a lot of strain on the family. The family will lose the child's help around the house during school hours and will have to pay for uniforms and supplies. If parents are forced to send one child to school over another, many will choose to educate boys before girls.

While Nigeria's system of higher education is the largest in Africa, the demand for higher education far exceeds the capacity of the facilities. There simply are not enough institutions to accommodate the demand. In 1998 only thirty-five thousand students were accepted into Nigerian universities out of a pool of more than four hundred thousand applicants.

Nigeria also has 125 technical training schools. The majority of these focus on polytechnic and agricultural training, with a few specializing in areas such as petroleum sciences and health.

While Nigeria's system of higher education is better than most in Africa, many of its best and brightest students go to universities in the United States or Europe in search of better facilities and academic support. These students often stay abroad, where there are more opportunities to pursue their talents and to benefit economically. This loss of sharp and influential minds has left the physical and social sciences in a poorer state than they need be. The few sciences that are thriving in Nigeria, such as geology and petroleum sciences, are often headed by non-Nigerians, brought in by foreign companies that have contracts to exploit Nigeria's natural resources.

Social Conventions in Nigeria

Age is greatly respected in Nigeria. In an area where the average life expectancy is not very high, those who live into their senior years are seen as having earned special rights of respect and admiration. This is true of both men and women. Socially, greetings are of the utmost importance. A handshake and a long list of well wishes for a counterpart's family and good health are expected when meeting someone especially among the Yoruba's. This is often true even if you have seen that person a short time earlier. Whether you are talking to a bank official or visiting a friend, it is considered rude not to engage in a proper greeting before getting down to business.

Shaking hands, eating, or passing things with the left hand are unacceptable. The left hand is reserved for personal toiletries and is considered dirty.