

## CHAPTER 4 LAND AND PEOPLES OF NIGERIA

### Objectives

At the end of the study, students should be able to:

- associate certain geographical features with different ethnic groups in Nigeria;
- classify geographical zones into which these ethnic groups fall;
- draw a map showing the early kingdoms in Nigeria;
- distinguish between prominent kingdoms in the North, West and Middle Belt zones.

### Introduction

The people of the territory which later became known as Nigeria had different cultural lives. The territory was made up of kingdoms and autonomous states with differing languages, traditions and civilization. Each ethnic group formed an independent bloc as their different geographical features influenced their political, economic and social behaviour.

#### 4.1 Geographical Features

Nigeria is bounded in the North by the Sahara Dessert and in the South by the Bight of Bonny, Bight of Benin and the Gulf of Guinea. It is bounded by the following countries: in the West by the Republic of Benin, in the North by Republic of Niger, North East by Chad Republic and West by the Republic of Cameroon. The country has three major geographical zones, namely; the coastal region, the forest regions and semi-savannah. The coastal and forest regions inhabited by the people of the South, namely; the Yoruba, Ife, Oyo, Benin, Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw, Itsekiri borders within the West, East and Niger Delta areas. Together, they form the forest zones. The North areas of Kanem Bornu and Hausa states formed the core Savannah zones while groups like Nupe, Igala, Jukun, Angas, Birom, Tiv, and Idoma made up the Middle Belt or Semi-Savannah zones.

The Middle Belt or Semi-Savannah remains a buffer or transitional zone between the Forest zones of the South and the real Savannah zone of the North. Both the root crops of the forest South and the grain crops of the Savannah North grow well in the Middle Belt. Much like the South, farm production is highly facilitated by the yearly dry and rainy seasons.

For the Savannah zone, there are four major sub-zones which are:

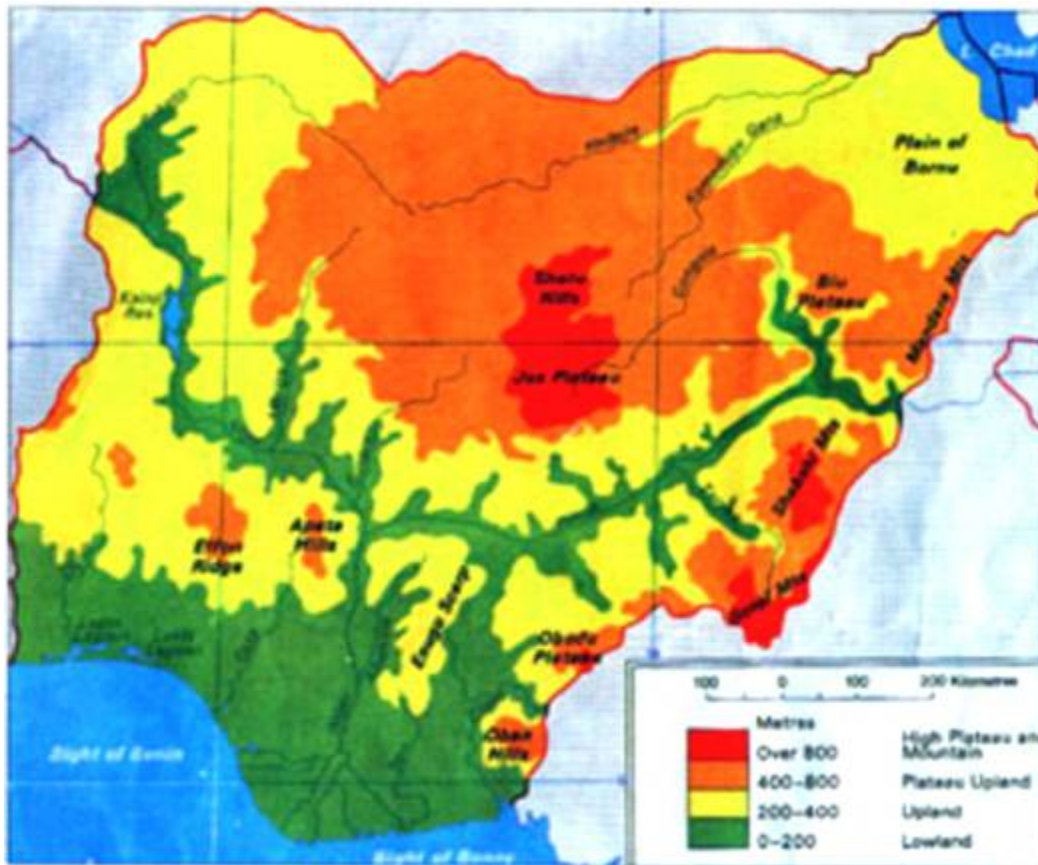
- i. The Guinea Savannah with its deciduous forest: It has interspersed giant trees, tall grasses, some river valleys and some appreciable quantum of rainfall. Some hard fruits and grain crops thrive there.

- ii. The Sudan Savannah Vegetation Belt which is North of the Guinea Savannah: It has a dominance of grass vegetation which are usually short. It has a lower amount of annual rainfall. Animals found in this region are mainly herbivores.
- iii. The Sahel Savannah Belt which is located north of Sudan Savannah: It mostly occurs within the North Eastern part of Nigeria in Yobe and Borno states. As a result of the very low level of rainfall in the region, only giant and poor grasses are found with few short shrubs and drought-resistant trees.
- iv. The Mountain Vegetation Belt: This is made up of tall trees by the foot of highlands and short grasses at tops: Mountain vegetation is found in the Plateau areas.

The forest zones of the South can be equally classified into four parts, namely;

- i. The mangrove swamp forest: The forest formation tilts towards the north of the Atlantic Ocean. The Creeks, coastal areas and the Delta are usually covered by the mangrove swamp forest with the waters being salty or brackish. It also harbours the 'Water hyacinth' covering the waters. This is common in the delta areas of Nigeria.
- ii. The fresh water swamp forest: This is found north of the mangrove swamp forest. The water is fresh with swampy soil unsuitable for cultivation. Mangrove trees remain a common site. This makes the people more of fish farmers than crop farmers.
- iii. The equatorial rain forest: In this belt are found densely populated trees and creepers. They are evergreen and numerable. Some of them are usually tall and of varying species.
- iv. The deciduous or monsoon forest: This belt accommodates both evergreen deciduous trees and creepers. The presence of the deciduous trees suggests the presence of dry season as it moves further North from the Atlantic coast.

It is pertinent to note that no mountain exists in Nigeria, only rivers and the Gulf of Guinea arm of the Atlantic ocean. However, there exists highlands in the Middle Belt, the far North and some parts of the South-West areas.



*Fig. 4.1 Map of Nigeria showing the geographical features*

## 4.2 Peoples of Nigeria

### **Kanem and Bornu**

Kanem-Bornu was in the central Sudan region and existed along side the 14 Hausa states between A.D 800-1800. It was located between the present Borno, Kano, Yobe and Lake Chad. They were tactful, strong, knowledgeable and experts in the construction of beautiful edifices, an art they learnt from the original occupiers of the land called the ‘SO’ tribe.

From 800 to 1470 AD, the Kanuri took over the land which became known as the first Kanem or Kanuri Empire’ which was ruled by the Zagbawa family or the Sefawa dynasty. This dynasty reigned until it was sacked by the Fulani Jihad of 1804-1810 which introduced the Islamic dynasty. The Sefawa dynasty, regarded as the longest ruling dynasty in the world, had three prominent kings by names of: Mai Umme Jilmi (1097); Mai Umme Dunama 1 (1907-1155); and Dunama 11 (1259).

The second Kanem-Bornu empire lasted from 1472 to 1810. It laid West of the Chadian Lake. Its first founder was Mai Ali Ghaji (1472-1504). By the time of Mai Idris Alooma (1580-1617), the empire had expanded to include areas like Damasak, Teda of Bornu, Bilma, Mandara, Kano and Karawa.

### **The Hausa States (AD 800-1808)**

Hausa states occupied the Northern area of today's Nigeria. They rose into prominence with the emergency of Bayyigida or Abuyazidu who migrated from Bagdad and married the queen of Daura after killing a deadly snake that threatened the lives of the people. His only son, Bawo, together with his six grandsons founded the seven original Hausa states called the eponymous states of Daura, Gobir, Katsina, Zausau or Zaria, Kano, Rano and Bilma with Daura as spiritual headquarters. These were traditionally called the Hausa Bokwai

Bawo's mistress gave birth to seven sons who also founded the seven Bastard or Banza Hausa states of Zamfara, Kebbi, Jukun or Kororofa, Yaura, Ilorin (a Yoruba town), Nupe and Yuri.



*Fig. 4.2: Map of Nigeria Showing the Hausa States*

### **The Nupe Kingdom**

The Nupe kingdom is located in the low basin between the Niger River valley and the Kaduna River. The mythical founder of the Nupe kingdom was Tsoede, also called Edegi, who reigned between A.D. 1523 and 1531 A.D. He was believed to have migrated from the Idah ruling class. The Nupe kingdom's influences extended from Kwara up to Bida where it finally made its capital, especially during the reign of Masaba in 1860 A.D. It was regarded as one of the seven bastard Hausa states on the Banza Bokwai.

### **Igala Kingdom**

The Igala people were known to have settled in their present location before the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Their origin had been traced to either Benin, Yoruba or Jukun kingdoms. They can be found around the Niger-Benue confluence. They occupied the whole triangular track of territory on the left bank of the Benue and Niger some 100 kilometers below and above the Lokoja confluence in the present Kogi state. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Igala Kingdom had extended to both sides of the Niger and to the banks of the Kaduna River. Akenagbe was regarded as the first Ata of Igala.

### **Jukun Kingdom**

The Jukun people, according to tradition, originated either from Yemil, East of Mecca or from one of the sons of Bawo as one of the Banza Bakwai, or Kwararafa. They are predominantly found in the upper and middle Benue River. Its kingdom was well established on the South of Benue River beginning from Apa (Bepi), Puje and Wukari. It rose to be reckoned with as one of the seven greatest kingdoms of the “Sudan” up to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Benin Kingdom**

The old Benin Kingdom, which gave rise to modern Benin, originated from the Binis or Edo people which started around River Benin under the Ogiso dynasty between C 900 and 1200AD. The empire was established around the South East of the Yoruba kingdom and between the River Niger and the Bight of Benin and Biafra.

The second Benin empire (1200-1897) was established by Eweka the son of Okanbi whose dynasty still runs till present time. The Benin kingdom being one of the strongest kingdoms in Africa, still subsists and covers the present Edo state in Nigeria.

### **Oyo Empire**

The Oyo empire remains the largest of the four great kingdoms of West Africa and the earliest empire in the Yoruba land. It was founded by Oranmiyan, the seventh child of Okanbi, whose father was Oduduwa. Oyo land lays on the Northern borders of Yoruba land close to the Niger River. This empire was established between A.D. 900 and 1000 AD around the time his other brothers Olowu, Alaketu, Eweka (Oba of Benin), Orangun, Onisabe and Olupopo founded their own cities. Oranmiyan preferred to use the title ‘Alaafin’ meaning “the owner of the land”. Oyo can still be found in the present Oyo state in Nigeria.

### **Itsekiri Kingdom**

The Itsekiri kingdom was founded by Prince Iginua of Benin in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. The kingdom was established in the former Niger-Delta. This included other lower Delta cities like Aboh and Ijo in today’s Delta state of Nigeria. This kingdom flourished till the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Yoruba and Ife**

The Yoruba people live South of the River Niger. They occupy the whole Western region including Lagos and parts of Kwara. The Bini people are however excluded. The old Yoruba land had Ile-Ife and Oyo as important cities until Ibadan emerged as the largest city in West Africa.

Since Ile-Ife was regarded as the place God created the world, it was regarded as the spiritual or ancestral home of the Yorubas. Oyo later emerged as the military head quarter. Oduduwa was regarded as the Patriarch of the Yorubas. He first settled at Ile-Ife. From here, they spread to other areas even beyond the West of the Niger.

### **The Igbos**

The Igbo occupy the fertile lands to the east of the lower Niger. South of the Igbo around the Niger Delta are the Ijaw and Itsekiri neighbours while further East are the Ibibio and the Efik. The Igbo had no conspicuous kingdoms, kingship or dynasty except in few areas like Asaba, Agbor, Ugwashi-ukwu, Onitsha and Oguta.

Their government was by the active participation of everybody. They occupy the present South East, the Ikah Igbo areas of Delta states, Rivers state, some parts of Akwa-Ibom and Bayelsa states in Nigeria. They lived in the thick forest North of the Niger Delta.

*Fig. 4.3: Map showing early kingdoms in Nigeria*

## **4.3 Impact of Geography on the History of the People**

The history and activities of these ancient cities and peoples were influenced greatly by their geographical placement. This impacted their culture, economy, religious practices and inter-state (inter-ethnic) relationships. These are examined under the following.

**A. Occupation and products:** The Savannah people in the North produced much of root crops and grains as a result of their climatic and geographical features. The millet, wheat, groundnuts and potatoes were, farmed. They also engaged in cattle rearing, product of sheep and goat beef, hides and skin. The Savannah grassland provided good environment for this system of farming.

From the Middle Belt, which is a transitional gateway to both the Savannah and forest zones, we witness a mixed economy. The terrain is able to produce grains, roots, fruits and tubers. In this terrain, there is also semi-grazing life since the Middle Belt is made up of a mixture of the Southern and Northern people. Fish farming is also a feature in this zone.

In the forest area, which includes the Niger Delta and the South of the Niger, crop farming, fishing, salt-making, lumbering and hunting are easily noticed. Meat production was basically hinged on the rearing of domestic animals and bush meat hunting. Predominant tribes in this area include the Yoruba, Igbo, Itsekiri, Bini, Ijaw, Efik and Ibibio. They depended largely on crop cultivation and fish production.

*Groundnut and sorghum (from the Savannah)*

*Yam tubers (from the middle belt)*

*Lumbers (from the forests)*

*Plantain (from the forests.)*

*llama (from the savannah)*

*Pepper (from the middle belt)*

*kola nuts (from the forests)*

*Fig. 4.4: Products from the different agricultural zones*

**B. Trade and means of transportation:** A big volume of movement of the people was recorded. There was inter-tribal or inter-ethnic relations. The people of the lower Nigeria and those of the Savannah North interacted through trade and commerce with the middle belt serving as the buffer zone.

Those from Borno, Kano, Sokoto and Kebbi travelled to the Middle belt and some parts of Yoruba land to sell their commodities and to buy products from both the middle belt and the Southern people. The means of transport was mainly by the use of camel or the caravan.

From the North, came iron and metal works, armour, dye weaved-clothes, cotton and leather –works. Some of the merchandise were bought from North Africa through the Trans-Saharan trade with the Hausa and which they, in turn, sold to the Middle Belt and Southern peoples. The Middle



Belt and the forest region of the South traded on salt, fish, timber, major fruits and crops. The forest region of the South depended largely on portage and canoeing as means of transport.

**C. Location and trade routes:** In the pre-colonial era, the North engaged in the Trans-Saharan trade which provided it with routes to North Africa, Asia and Saudi-Arabia. The stock-in-trade included salt, firearms from Cairo, Tunis and Tripoli and slaves who were mainly eunuchs. On their part, the Hausas exported kolanuts from the South region of Nigeria. To these people, they also exported sugar cane, onions, sorghum and beef.

The weather condition and climatic factors, occasioned by the dry and hot weather, informed their dress code of flowing gowns for women and also the flowing caftan for the men. Due to the scarcity of flowing streams, washing of feet, face and limbs were predominant. Being predominantly farmers and grazers, they engaged in early marriages and rearing of large families since the economy was largely agrarian. The non-confined nature of their territories made them vulnerable to the attacks of enemies and in like manner made them equally aggressive when provoked and war-like. Visibly ready for any demanding situation, they wore charms and weapons of defense.

Bulrushes, elephant grass, bambo and sand provided the materials for their housing needs. The near absence of tall trees with hard or soft woods encouraged the construction of huts for residency. As a result of the vastness of land, individual families lived miles apart as each had enough land to cultivate, grazing area and space for the large polygamous family. There were also carvers, sculptors, blacksmiths and crop farmers who helped to stabilize and sustain the economy. They made hats, mats and hand fans from grass materials, made leather bags and foot wears from animal hides and skins and produced oil from the peanuts. As a result of the fact that they had no much barriers like highlands, forests and streams, they enjoyed uninhibited long journey with the help of their camels to make far reaching contacts with other ethnic groups.

On the side of the Middle Belt, peoples inhabiting the Semi Savannah belt, their culture, economy, politics and religion were largely determined by the social forces from both the South and the North. The Nupe, Idoma, Tiv, Igala and the rest easily embraced the Islamic faith and the Hausa language became a lingua franca due to their commercial dependency on the North. They also copied the culture and tradition of the Hausas which facilitated the exchanges between the two zones leading to the assumption that they were subsumed or conquered by the forces from the north.

The influence of the South was also great on the Middle Belt peoples. They equally adopted many Agricultural crops of the zone, they copied their crafts in boat-making, fishing and resilience. They accommodated some traditions and political system from the south. This made the area a free trade zone. Currencies such as the manilas, cowry shells and copper bars were used for commercial transactions.

On the other hand, the Southern people of Igbo, Yoruba, Bini, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Ibibio, Efik etc. lived within the thick forest and hilly zone. Their natural habitat made it cumbersome to reach out to far neighbours. The creeks, lakes, ocean, rivers highlands and huge forests discouraged travelling

escapades. They however felt secure and contented. Their lands were rich for cultivation. They had more than enough mineral resources plus the produce of the forests, evergreen plants and sea resources.

The zone is generally humid with experiences of torrential rainfall during the rainy season. Generally, in the North, they reared cattle, and cultivated aquatic, domestic and wild animals. They had enough lumberable trees to construct their red mud (laterite) houses with. The Raffia palm and the palm trees also provided them with wine. Owing to the forestry and swampy nature of the zone, a given area of habitation was densely populated. The result was that there were inter-communal land disputes and local or ethnic skirmishes. However, the cluster prevented sporadic raids by enemies and wild animals.

Despite being agrarians, they engaged in fish farming, lumbering, blacksmithing, canoe building, wine tapping, hunting and the rearing of domestic animal.



Hausa man and woman



An Igbo man and woman



A Yoruba man and woman

*Fig. 4: Some Nigerian traditional attires*

**D. Geographical habits and commodity trade:** The varying geographical habitats made it necessary for exchange of commodity and consequently for inter-group relations. The North occupies the gateways to the North, Central and even to the West of Africa and beyond. The South opens up to the Atlantic ocean. In the pre-colonial era, the south could be said to be blockaded by the ocean a situation which made economic interaction tilt Northward hence the importance of the Middle Belt states.

The exchanges between the North and the outside world could only improve their lots with the commercial exchanges with the south as hosted in the Middle Belt. Each of the zones needed one another's commodities. Through the means of commerce, there was socio-cultural dynamism, changes in perceptions which even led to flourishing inter-tribal marriages. This accounted for the reason the zones remained independent of each other politically till the advent of the colonial masters.

### Summary

- The geographical features around different ethnic groups impacted on their behaviors. It helped in setting up their culture, influenced their occupation, mode of transport, communication, trade and commerce and pattern of religious worship.
- The Hausa states in the North inhabited the Savannah grassland which helped it to relate with the middle belt and the Trans-Saharan states. Through its commercial influences it established powerful empires like the Kanem-Bornu empire.
- The Middle Belt zone was a buffer zone of interaction between the states in the south and those in the north. Empires like the Nupe, Igala and Jukun emerged.
- The South, which comprises the Yoruba and the Igbos inhabiting the Niger forest area, had interaction with the North through the Middle Belt states. As a result, empires like Oyo, Itsekiri and Ife sprang up.
- One thing common to all was that they were all Agrarian societies.

### Revision Questions

## Objectives

1. The people living in the semi-savannah zone in Nigeria are the \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Itsekiri
  - B. Oyo
  - C. Jukun
  - D. Kanuri
2. One of the most noticeable features of the core savannah zone is its \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. aridity
  - B. humidity
  - C. tree climbing animals
  - D. coastal zone
3. The Gulf of Guinea served as a bulwark to the people of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Angas
  - B. Nupe
  - C. Yoruba land
  - D. South of the Niger
4. The water hyacinth is common in the \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. mangrove swampy area
  - B. montare vegetation belt
  - C. fresh water swamps
  - D. kanem-Borno empire
5. The absence of mountains in Nigeria \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. encouraged tribal wars
  - B. encouraged inter-ethnic interrelations
  - C. made the north vulnerable to hot weather
  - D. made the rivers obviously important
6. The tribe which influenced the life pattern of the Kanuri people the most was \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Sefawa dynasty
  - B. Hausa
  - C. So
  - D. Bini
7. The seven bastard states of Hausa, were traditionally referred to as \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Jukun
  - B. Kanem
  - C. Apa
  - D. Hausa Bokwai

8. While Oyo remained the military capital of the Yoruba, the ancestral home remained \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. Bini
  - B. Ile-Ife
  - C. Orangun
  - D. Alaketu
9. The middle zone is said to be a buffer zone for interaction between \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. The Igbos and their neighbours
  - B. Jukun and the Igala people
  - C. Bini and the Yoruba
  - D. The forest zone and the savannah
10. As a result of trade, the comer – language which became more widely spoken in Nigeria was the \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. Gwari
  - B. Hausa
  - C. Fulfulbe
  - D. Ibibio

### Essay Questions

1.
  - a. Classify the geo-political zones in Nigeria.
  - b. Briefly explain the features of each of the three zones.
2. Compare and contrast the middle belt and core savannah zones
3. Appropriately locate each of the following:
  - a. Kanem-Bornu (Kanuri)
  - b. The Hausa states
  - c. Nupe kingdom
  - d. Yoruba kingdom
  - e. The Igbo
4. In what ways did the geographical features affect the economy of the North.
5. What special features and activities are attributable to the Delta area of the Niger.